

Painted Words

An Anthology of Tribal Literature

Edited by
G. N. Devy

Painted Words : An Anthology of Tribal Literature

Edited by G. N. Devy

First published by Penguin Books India, 2002

Reprinted 2012

© Purva Prakash, Vadodara

All rights reserved. This material may not be reproduced or transmitted, either in part or full, in any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopy, recording or any information storage and retrieval systems, without permission in writing from the publishers.

ISBN No. 978-81-922405-4-1

Layout by Niraj Kenge

Cover Design by Lokesh Khetan

Cover Image and Photographs Courtesy: Photo Archives of Bhasha Centre

Typeset in 10.5/13 pt. Aldine 401BT

Published by

Purva Prakash

19B Shringar Society

Opp. Shreenathdham Duplex

Near Dinesh Mill

Vadodara 390 007

Gujarat

Tel : 0265-2353347, 2331968

email: purvapublishing@gmail.com

website: www.bhasharesearch.org

Printed at Shivam Offset, Vadodara

*For Rashmi,
who gave up her right to my time and material belongings
so I could enter the tribal world*

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the following publishers:

Oxford University Press for permission to reproduce lyrics from *Folk Songs of Chhattisgarh* (1946, pp. 20-22) and *Folk Songs of Maikal Hills* (1944, pp. 256-59), both by Verrier Elwin.

Sahitya Akademi for permission to reproduce excerpts from Sitakant Mahapatra's *The Endless Weave* (1994), Laxman Mane's *Upa* (1997), Laxman Gaikwad's *The Branded* (1998) and *Male Madeshwara*, translated from the Kannada by C. N. Ramachandran (2001).

Penguin India for permission to reproduce an excerpt from Kishore Kale's *Against All Odds* (2000).

I would also like to thank all the contributors who have carried out the arduous task of documenting the pieces, and the translators who have rendered them into English.

My colleagues at the Bhasha Research Centre gave unstinting support and assistance at every stage of preparation of this volume. I would like to put on record my appreciation for their help.

Contents

Introduction	ix
Creation	1-7
Binti	3
Myth	9-60
From the Bhilli <i>Mahabharat</i>	13
From the Kunkana <i>Ramayan</i>	37
Epic	61-94
From <i>Manteswamy</i>	65
From <i>Male Madeshwara</i>	77
Legend	95-130
Tejan Bal	99
The Tale of a Takalong Cucumber	111
Chhura	117
Kaba and Baji	126
Lyric	131-155
Garhwali Songs	135
Chhattisgarhi Songs	138
Saora Songs	143
Krud Ksing Songs	148
Garo Songs	151
Songs of Birth and Death	153

Autobiography	157-241
From <i>Koletyache</i> Por, by Kishore Shantabai Kale	161
From <i>Upara</i> , by Laxman Mane	180
From <i>Tanda</i> , by Atmaram Kaniram Rathod	196
From <i>Uchalya</i> , by Laxman Gaikwad	224
Drama	243-273
<i>Budhan</i>	245
Appendix: A Vision of Tribal India	273-289
Makar Savar, by Mahasveta Devi	275
Glossary	290

Introduction

It is almost impossible to characterize all of India's tribals in a single ethnographic or historic framework. In the Indian context, the term 'tribal' is too layered to be a synonym for 'indigenous'. The tribals are not necessarily racially distinct, nor are they all necessarily the original inhabitants of the areas they inhabit though many tribal communities are so. Throughout India's long history, communities have migrated, been forcefully displaced and rehabilitated themselves. In addition, the subcontinent has a tradition of long-distance nomadism (which is not the same as the pastoral tradition of seasonal migration within a limited area). The tribals have not been completely cut off from the non-tribals. Since ancient times, exchanges between the two communities have been of profound significance in areas such as medicine, folklore, narrative technique, religious abstraction, music, dance, theatre and even agricultural technology.

Since it is impossible to characterize tribals by any single distinguishing feature, it can be tempting to argue that in the present-day context tribals are simply the most underprivileged or underdeveloped groups in the country. This argument is valid only in part. It is true that most tribals are underprivileged (with the exception of some in the Northeast), but they can be called 'underdeveloped' only if development is understood in the inappropriate terms currently in circulation. Given the difficulty of defining tribal identity, we are forced to fall back on the official listings that make up the Schedule of Tribes and enumerate the Denotified and Nomadic Communities. Through a series of legal enactments beginning with the Criminal Tribes Act of 1871, nearly 200 communities were 'notified' by the colonial government as 'criminal

tribes'. After Independence, these communities were 'denotified' and placed quite randomly in the schedules of tribes, castes and 'other backward communities'. Yet anyone with any experience of tribal culture will find these listings mind-bogglingly oversimplified.

The most useful indicator of tribal identity, then, is language. This book is an introductory sampling of the literary imaginations of those communities whose speech traditions face the prospect of forced aphasia. The selections are representative works from languages that have remained largely spoken and are just beginning to be written; languages that have slowly started acquiring scripts and developing written forms of literature, dialects that are fast perishing because they are on the margins of the main languages, or from communities that have remained outside the caste fold of Indian society.



Most tribal communities in India are culturally similar to tribal communities elsewhere in the world. They live in groups that are cohesive and organically unified. They show very little interest in accumulating wealth or in using labour as a device to gather interest and capital. They accept a worldview in which nature, man and God are intimately linked, and believe in the human ability to spell and interpret truth. They live more by intuition than by reason, they consider the space around them more sacred than secular, and their sense of time is personal rather than objective. The world of the tribal imagination, therefore, is substantially different from that of the non-tribal Indian society.

Once a society accepts a secular mode of creativity, within which the creator replaces God, imaginative transactions assume a self-conscious form. The tribal imagination, on the other hand, is still to a large extent dreamlike and hallucinatory. It admits fusion between various planes of existence and levels of time in a natural and artless manner. In tribal stories, oceans fly in the sky as birds, mountains swim in water as fish, animals speak as humans and stars grow like plants. Spatial order and temporal sequence do not restrict the narrative. This is not to say that tribal creations have no conventions or rules, but simply that they admit the principle of association

between emotion and the narrative motif. Thus stars, seas, mountains, trees, men and animals can be angry, sad or happy.

It might be said that tribal artists work more on the basis of their racial and sensory memory than on the basis of a cultivated imagination. In order to understand this distinction, we must understand the difference between imagination and memory. In the animate world, consciousness meets two immediate material realities: space and time. We put meaning into space by perceiving it in terms of images. The image-making faculty is a genetic gift to the human mind—this power of imagination helps us understand the space that envelops us. With regard to time, we make connections with the help of memory; one remembers being the same person today as one was yesterday.

The tribal mind has a more acute sense of time than the sense of space. Somewhere along the history of human civilization, tribal communities seem to have realized that domination over territorial space was not their lot. Thus, they seem to have turned almost obsessively to gaining domination over time. This urge is substantiated in their ritual of conversing with their dead ancestors: year after year, tribals in many parts of India worship terracotta or carved-wood objects representing their ancestors, aspiring to enter a trance in which they can converse with the dead. Over the centuries, an amazingly sharp memory has helped tribals classify material and natural objects into a highly complex system of knowledge. The importance of memory in tribal systems of knowledge has not yet been sufficiently recognized, but the aesthetic proportions of the houses tribals build, the objects they make and the rituals they perform fascinate the curious onlooker. It can be hard to understand how, without any institutional training or tutoring, tribals are able to design, organise, craft, build and express so well.

In contemporary practice, the tribal memory is greatly undermined. There is a general insistence that tribal children attend schools where non-tribal children attend school, that they use medicines manufactured for others and that they adopt common agricultural practices. All because the world has very little time to listen patiently to the tribals, with their immense knowledge and creativity. We have

decided that what is good for us is good enough for them. In the process we are destroying a rich vein of our cultural heritage. A proper understanding of the tribal imagination can add to our literature and art. Indian literature has been burdened for the last two centuries by the ‘perspective imagination’ of Western origin. Because our systems of knowledge have been more or less replaced by Western systems, the tribal is now the only Indian unaffected by the colonial consciousness. To pose the question of memory once again may thus help rekindle our culture.

A vast number of Indian languages have yet remained only spoken, with the result that literary compositions in these languages are not considered ‘literature’. They are a feast for the folklorist, anthropologist and linguist, but to a literary critic they generally mean nothing. Similarly, several nomadic Indian communities are broken up and spread over long distances but survive as communities because they are bound by their oral epics. The wealth and variety of these works is so enormous that one discovers their neglect with a sense of pure shame. Some of the songs and stories I heard from itinerant street singers in my childhood are no longer available anywhere. For some years now I have been collecting songs and stories that circulate in India’s tribal languages, and I am continually overwhelmed by their number and their profound influence on the tribal communities. The result is that I, for one, can no longer think of literature as something written. Of course, I do not dispute the claim of written compositions and texts to the status of literature; but surely it is time we realize that unless we modify the established notion of literature as something written, we will silently witness the decline of various Indian oral traditions. That literature is a lot more than writing is a reminder necessary for our times.



One of the main characteristics of the tribal arts is their distinct manner of constructing space and imagery, which might be described as ‘hallucinatory’. In both oral and visual forms of representation, tribal artists seem to interpret verbal or pictorial space as demarcated by an extremely flexible ‘frame’. The boundaries between art and non-art become almost invisible. A tribal epic can begin its narration

from a trivial everyday event; tribal paintings merge with living space as if the two were one and the same. And within the narrative itself, or within the painted imagery, there is no deliberate attempt to follow a sequence. The episodes retold and the images created take on the apparently chaotic shapes of dreams. In a tribal *Ramayan*, an episode from the *Mahabharat* makes a sudden and surprising appearance; tribal paintings contain a curious mixture of traditional and modern imagery. In a way, the syntax of language and the grammar of painting are the same, as if literature were painted words and painting were a song of images.

Yet it is not safe to assume that the tribal arts do not employ any ordering principles. On the contrary, the ordering principles are very strict. The most important among these is convention. Though the casual spectator may not notice, every tribal performance and creation has at its back another such performance or creation belonging to a previous occasion. The creativity of the tribal artist lies in adhering to the past while at the same time slightly subverting it. The subversions are more playful than ironic.

Indeed, playfulness is the soul of the tribal arts. Though oral and pictorial tribal art creations are intimately related to rituals—the sacred can never be left out—the tribal arts rarely assume a serious or pretentious tone. The artist rarely plays the role of the Creator. Listening to tribal epics can be great fun, as even the heroes are not spared the occasional shock of the artist's humour. One reason for this unique mixture of the sacred and the ordinary may be that tribal works of art are not created specifically for sale. Artists do expect a certain amount of patronage from the community, like artists in any other context; but since those performing rituals are very often artists themselves, there is no element of competition in the patron-artist relationship. The tribal arts are therefore relaxed, never tense.

Finally, the tribal arts have a notable attitude of indulgence towards their medium. When a tribal storyteller narrates an episode, he often stops at a word or phrase and plays upon its tonal qualities, exploiting its phonetic potential to the maximum. Tribal craftsmen and painters seem almost to show off their love for the colours they use. Tribals have an intense sense of shapes and geometry, and an acute feel for

the texture of the materials they use to make things. In whatever they build or make, they reveal and highlight the shapes, tones and textures they handle. It's as though the message of the medium is more important than the message framed in the artist's conceptual understanding. Hence, every tribal artist conceals his individual identity by foregrounding the medium itself. In their exuberant love for the materials used, tribal creations seem almost like prayerful offerings to the elements that make this world such a mysteriously beautiful place.

One question invariably asked about tribal arts is whether they are static—frozen in tradition—or dynamic. A general misconception is that the orally transmitted arts are entirely tradition-bound, with little scope for individual experimentation beyond the small freedom to distort the previously created text. This misconception arises from the habit of seeing art only with reference to the text; but the tribal arts involve not just text but performance and audience reception. Experimentation in the tribal arts can be understood only when they are approached as performing arts.

Non-tribals usually fail to notice that all of India's tribal communities are basically bilingual. Bilingual communities have an innate capacity to assimilate outside influences, and in this case a highly evolved mechanism for responding to the non-tribal world. Tribal oral stories and songs employ bilingualism in such a complex manner that a linguist who is not alert to this complexity is in danger of dismissing the tribal languages altogether as dialects of India's major tongues.

Lest this anthology be misinterpreted as the arrival of a new sensibility in the field of literary creativity, it is necessary to add a note of caution. The language into which the works have been translated, English, carries massive colonial baggage. When the works of contemporary Indian writers—who inherit a multilingual tradition several thousand years old—were classified as 'new literature', Western academics had no idea how comical this classification looked to the literary community in India. Hence it is necessary to assert that the literature of the Adivasis is not a new 'movement' or a fresh 'trend' in the field of literature; most people have simply been unaware of its

existence, and that is not the fault of the tribals themselves. What might be new is the present attempt to see imaginative expression in tribal languages not as ‘folklore’ but as literature, and to hear tribal speech not as a dialect but as a language. This attitude may be somewhat unconventional, but only until we recall that scripts themselves are relatively new, and that the printing of literary texts goes no further back than a few centuries—in comparison with creative experiments with the human ability to produce speech in such a way that it transcends time. In fact, every written piece of literature contains numerous layers of orality. This is particularly true for poetry and drama, but even in prose fiction the element of orality needs to be significant if the work is to be effective. If this anthology seems to make any theoretical statement, it should be seen as a statement relating to the basic nature of imaginative language, and nothing more.

Whatever else be the merit of this book, it certainly is not an attempt to ‘speak for’ the marginalized languages. I have no desire to be romantic about tribal literature. Human languages (even those without scripts) and linguistic creativity (even when it is not a commodity in the arts market) simply deserve greater respect. My modest intention in preparing this volume is to share with the general literary community the joy and excitement I have experienced while working in tribal villages. I have read some of these pieces with my students at the Adivasi Academy in Tejgadh, and have seen them respond as genuinely and profoundly as I have seen other students respond to printed or written literature at the Baroda University. Only the conventions of the tribal imagination are different; and of course these should not be essentialized, only identified.

When faced with the challenge of choosing works from nearly eighty languages, it is impossible not only to make decisions that will go undisputed but even to decide on a set of criteria. I do not claim that this anthology is representative, or even that it strikes a linguistic, ethnic or regional balance. I have merely made a tentative attempt to present as many literary genres as possible, and hence there are excerpts from tribal epics, long heroic narratives, legends, tribal songs, autobiographical writings and a tribal play. The selections in the first five sections (creation, myth, epic, legend and lyric) are drawn from

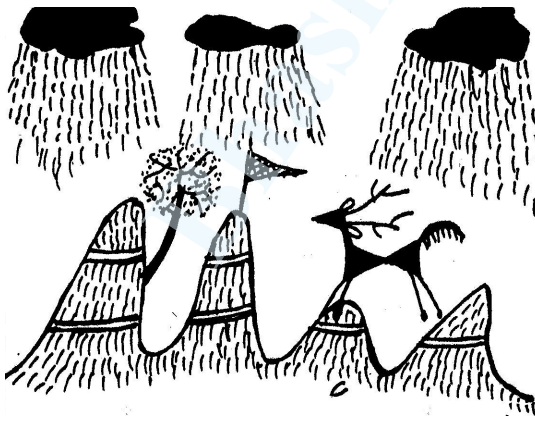
the works of the Adivasis, while the autobiography and drama sections are drawn from the works of the denotified communities. It should be noted that most of the denotified and nomadic communities are now seeking dissolution of their communal identities in order to escape their stigmatized existence; most have taken to mainstream education, restricted, of course, to the most elementary levels. Their writing has so far appeared with Dalit writing as a rebellion of sensibility, but in fact the issues on the agenda of the denotified communities are markedly different from those of the Dalits. It is more appropriate to place the denotified communities with the Adivasis. In a way, the developmental trauma of the Adivasis, and the unintended but massive cultural desiccation they face, will eventually and unfortunately, make the Adivasis 'denotified' communities as well. In that sense, the two segments of imagination are of a piece. But the reader should be aware that the autobiographies are not from the oral tradition, even if they do not conform to the literary conventions of the major languages, either.

One should note that the story by Mahasveta Devi is not from any tribal language, nor is the author a tribal herself. The story is included because, in recent years, no other Indian writer has drawn our attention to the tribals more evocatively than she has. Her writings on the tribal communities have been the most sympathetic imaginative approximations of the tribal existence.

In the end, this anthology is probably nothing more than an introduction to the rich and varied imagination of the Adivasis and denotified communities. The *Painted Words* anthology was compiled in response to an invitation by Penguin Books India. Since its first publication in 2002, it is being used by students in English speaking countries for a variety of courses. The critical response to it has far exceeded my modest expectations and it was necessary to bring out another edition. I am glad that Purva Prakash has undertaken to do so.

G. N. Devy
Baroda
July 2012

CREATION





∞ *Binti*

Binti, the Santhal song of cosmology, is recited by a group of three or more singers at marriage ceremonies. When the members of the bridegroom's party arrive at the bride's house, they are asked several puzzling questions and expected to give proper answers. Both the questions and the answers are presented in the form of songs, amid ongoing jest and good humour. The rigidity of this test has declined in recent years, but still no food or drink is served until the questions are answered correctly.

Once the test has been passed, the bride's party introduces the Binti song, and liberal quantities of *handia* are served. The song is meant to place this particular ceremony and celebration in a wider, universal context of tradition and society: it traces the institution of marriage back to the creation of the world, the dawn of human civilization and the emergence and migration of the Santhal community.

Binti is a part of an important oral tradition. Every village has a few professional singers who have learnt the song by heart from their forefathers. As in every oral tradition, there are occasional modifications, but the theme varies only marginally. The singers introduce the subject by declaring that they have not witnessed the incidents they are going to narrate, but have only heard about them from their ancestors.

The song is repetitive, with many refrain lines, and thus quite long in performance. It lasted two to three hours without interruption. We present here a summary of the song as recorded in the village of Kalimati.



Binti

The world as we see it today did not exist then. Everywhere there was only an endless expanse of water. Trees, creepers, animals—nothing existed. Maranburu and the gods in the heavens decided to create a world in this universal expanse of water and give birth to trees, creepers and animals. After further deliberation, Maranburu rubbed the dirt off his left and right palms, and with it fashioned two tiny birds. He then instilled life into these birds. The bird created from the dirt of his left palm became female, the *Hansli chene*, and the bird created from the dirt of his right palm became male, the *Hans chene*. The moment the two birds received life, they started singing and cackling, and asked for a place where they could build a nest. Maranburu took pity on them, and through the gods, directed Kichua Raj, king of the earthworms, to bring some earth from the bottom of the sea and place it on the surface of the water. Kichua Raj did accordingly but all the earth he brought dissolved at once in the waters of the sea. Maranburu and the gods began to worry. After much deliberation, they decided that a king cobra would sit on the back of the Hara Raj, king of the turtles, that a golden plate would be kept on the head of the cobra and that Kichua Raj would put all the soil brought up from the bottom of the sea on this plate. As this was done, the earth gradually took shape, and in turn, trees and creepers were born.

Eventually, Maranburu planted a karam tree on the earth, and the two birds went to live in it. They built a nest and laid two eggs. From these two eggs the first humans were born—a male and a female. The moment they were born, they started crying, and the whole sky was rent with their cries. Maranburu and all the gods came down to see them, and Maranburu explained to the gods that





these were the first human beings. He took them out of the bird's nest, placed them on the leaves of an asan tree, took them on his lap, purified them by sprinkling cow-dung water on them and named them Pilchu Kala and Pilchi Kuli. The gods built a house for Pilchu Kala and Pilchi Kuli, and gradually they passed from childhood into youth. They were naked, but did not know shame.

In the meantime, the gods consulted Maranburu as to how humankind would grow in numbers. Maranburu advised Pilchu Kala and Pilchi Kuli to cook rice with the seeds of sagah grass and to soak it with water and three measures of powdered *ranu*. This should be left to ferment for three days, after which the liquid portion should be decanted and drunk after first being offered to him. Following His direction, Pilchu Kala and Pilchi Kuli prepared this drink, what we know as handia, and took it. They felt the stirrings of sex and fell in love. With love came feelings of shame, sin, good and evil. When Maranburu appeared before them, Pilchu Kala and Pilchi Kuli confessed their sense of guilt and shame for having fallen in love. He advised them to wear the leaves of the trees and explained to them that there was no sin in love—it is the most sacred human emotion. He directed them to live as husband and wife from that day, and to earn their livelihood by cultivating the land. They lived accordingly, and with the passage of time had seven sons and seven daughters. These children in their turn grew up and passed from childhood and adolescence to youth. They went to the forests for *shikar*, and the young maidens also went for flowers and fruits. During these sojourns in the forest, the seven sons and seven daughters of Pilchu Kala and Pilchi Kuli fell in love in pairs. Maranburu assured Pilchu Kala and Pilchi Kuli that there was no sin in this, even though they were brothers and sisters, but their marriages must proceed according to the prescribed laws of the *gotras*. Once, while hunting in the forest, the siblings killed a *murmum enga* with an arrow. It was so big that they could not carry it home, so they decided to carve it up in the jungle itself. To their surprise, there was a live human being in the animal's stomach! They named this child Bitol Murmu. They then cooked the rest of the meat and feasted in the forest. Between the killing of the animal, the dressing of the meat and the final feast,





various functions had to be performed. Depending on their function, each performer was assigned particular *parises*: (i) Murmu (ii) Hansda (iii) Hembrom (iv) Marandi (v) Soren (vi) Tudu (vii) Kisku (viii) Baske (ix) Chane (x) Besra (xi) Danda (xii) Gondwar.

Since Bitol Murmu had come out of the stomach of the murmum enga, he was assigned all the social functions relating to birth, death, and the like. Likewise, other functions were assigned to other gotras. With the birth of children to these seven parents, the sons and daughters of Pilchu Kala and Pilchi Kuli, mankind gradually increased in numbers. The parents assembled in the shade of three trees in the forest—a *lepej reel*, *khad matkon* and *ladeya bale*—and discussed where to establish their settlement. It took them twelve long years to reach a decision, and they ultimately settled in the shade of a *sari sarjom*. They tied a brownish pullet, or young fowl, to a sal tree for five nights, and when they found that the bird was not killed by any of the animals of the forest, they decided that the spot was the proper place for a human settlement. Beneath the tree was designated the Taher Era, or sacred grove, and it was here that the sons and daughters of Pilchu Kala and Pilchi Kuli worshipped their deities. They built their homes nearby.

The song goes on to describe the growth of the tribe's population, their migration through different places such as Hihidi and Pipidi, the wars they had to wage with local inhabitants as they continued their journey and how they finally came to the land where they live now. It ends by recounting how they remember all this with gratitude to their ancestors, whose blessings are then invoked for making this particular marriage a happy communion of souls.

Translated by Sitakant Mahapatra



MYTH





§ *Mahabharat*

§ *Ramayan*

Tribal oral traditions are based on the gift of memory, yet the sheer length of the tribal past makes it impossible to distinguish between the historical past and the mythical past. Moreover, the tribals' primary occupation—agriculture—makes the interweaving of the natural and the supernatural an inevitable core of their oral tradition. Therefore, myth governs the tribal memory and existence more organically than it does the imagination of caste-bound non-tribal India.

It can be surprising to learn that the *Mahabharat* and the *Ramayan* have a strong presence in tribal lore; but the *Mahabharat* has its origin in several oral traditions, and the *Ramayan* is, after all, a story of conflict between forest-dwellers and city-dwellers. So many versions of these epics survive in various tribal languages that one is almost tempted to claim that they are primarily of tribal origin. However, the history of cultural exchange between India's castes and tribes has been far too complicated to allow such a binary distribution of cultural credit.

The rendering of the epics in tribal communities takes the form of a performance, which is also a sacred ritual. The space within which the narrator 'performs' is first sanctified through propitiation, either by chanting (accompanied by stringed instruments) or by drawing figures of the characters in the episodes to be narrated, using rice or other food grains. As the audience gets absorbed in the music and rhetoric, those accompanying the principal singer step forward to do a few dance steps, also representing characters. Thus are ritual, story,





song, music, dance, drama, painting and performance rolled together in a single communicative experience. The performance can go on for several evenings, each one lasting through the night till dawn.

Non-tribal readers of the tribal *Mahabharat* and *Ramayan* are naturally inclined to see them as subversions of the standardized Indian epics. While the tribal plots do differ markedly from the more familiar versions, many of the tribal myth-plots are, in historical terms, *pre-*versions rather than sub-versions, so it is almost impossible to say who is subverting whose world-view.

Tribal mythology in India is now facing extinction, primarily due to outside pressure on the communities to acquire a fixed religious denomination. Singers of mythical lore are increasingly rare, and learners in the next generation are few or none.

The section of the *Mahabharat* reproduced here is from the Dungri Bhil community of Banaskantha district in north Gujarat. The excerpt from the *Ramayan* comes from the Kunkana community of Dangs district on the border between Gujarat and Maharashtra. In the recitation tradition, both renditions combine verse and prose. We provide prose translations in order to highlight the plot rather than the stylistic graces.



From the Bhilli Mahabharat

Santanu and Ganga

Once upon a time a frog embarked on a pilgrimage to the Ganges. The frog came across a big city on his way. He roamed around the marketplace and was trampled by a herd of roaming cattle. His soul entered the womb of a barren woman, the wife of a trader. In due course, after nine months and nine days, she gave birth to a male child. The child grew up to be a bright young man. The trader's son then thought, 'What will I do at home? I must go seek work, but which job should I seek? I must seek a job with a great man, and Indra is the greatest. Hence, I must seek employment with Indra alone.' The trader's son went to Indrapuri.

'Why have you come here?' Indra inquired. 'To which community do you belong?'

'I have come, sir, to ask for employment with you,' the young man replied. 'I am a trader's son.'

Indra duly employed the young man, and sought to instill wisdom in him. Once it happened that the trader's son was sitting outside and cleaning his teeth. A cleaning woman came to do her chores in the marketplace. The trader's son, while brushing, thought, 'I must adopt this woman as my sister. But what can I give her as my offering?' The trader finally gave his adopted sister clothes of gold. One day the trader's adopted sister went to Indrapuri to clean the palace. Indra, who was just emerging from the palace of clouds, saw this woman dressed in golden clothes.

'Only Indrani, the queen, wears clothes of gold,' he said. 'From where, then, have you acquired these clothes?'

The cleaning woman replied, 'Indra, your servant has given them





to me. He has adopted me as his sister.'

'Really?' Indra said. He went to his court and called it into session. His Majesty and the courtiers had an animated discussion. Indra, the king of gods, addressed them: 'Nobles, we command you thus! Who has adorned that woman servant with golden attire?'

'I, sir, am responsible,' the trader's son replied.

'I have made you a great noble, and yet you have the cheek to work against my interests! Only Indrani, the queen, wears such clothes! Your services are no longer solicited. You are dismissed.'

The trader's son was unperturbed. 'All right, but I demand my salary for the years I've spent in your court and at your service.'

'Well,' Indra thought, 'I must owe him lakhs, but who has kept the accounts for such figures?'

'My dear great noble, bring your bullock cart,' Indra said. Indra filled several bags with money, measured in Manu, and handed them over to the trader's son. 'Here is your salary. You are now dismissed.'

The trader's son trod his familiar path towards home and hearth. 'What will I do with all this accumulated wealth? Why not spend half of the amount on a pilgrimage to the Ganges, and then go home?' So the trader's son trod the path towards the Ganges. On the way to the river, he entered a deep forest. While travelling in the forest, one of his bulls collapsed and died. The son sank to the ground and pleaded with the Sun God, 'O power, I am caught in the forest! What will I do here? O my forgiving Sun God, my bull has died in this forest. Please come and help me, rescue me from this calamity.'

The Sun God obliged the trader's son and appeared before him in the forest. 'Why have you called me?' he asked.

'My bull has died in this forest. In this lonely place I have neither my mother nor my sisters to turn to! This is why I called for you.'

The Sun God asked for a pledge: 'If I revive this bull, you shall give me half of the wealth loaded in this cart.' The trader's son accepted these terms and the bull rose from the throes of death.

The trader's son continued towards the Ganges.

When he arrived at the river, he had his bath and because he had decided to spend half of the wealth on the way, he drowned half the





wealth in the river. On his way home from the river, he again ran into the Sun God. ‘Trader! Where is my promised share of the wealth?’

‘Deva, I committed a mistake. I offered yours as well as my share to the Ganges.’

‘You wolf! You should have at least given me my share!’

The trader’s son was thus cursed into the form of a wolf. His bulls were cursed and turned into a *sambhar* and a pig.

One day the wolf went to drink some water and swam to the thirteenth netherworld. Coincidentally, the beautiful Ganga, adorned with a golden bracelet and glowing like fire, was bathing in the river. The wolf, hiding behind the tall grass, saw her thus. ‘Oh! She is Ganga,’ he thought.

‘Ganga, O Ganga!’ he called.

‘Who are you?’ she asked.

‘I am a wolf. Will you marry me?’

‘By birth he is a wolf, yet he has the audacity to think in this vein?’ Ganga said. She continued to bathe and the wolf babbled on and on. Soon Ganga lost her patience and pelted a stone at the wolf. It hit him in the eye.

‘Now you have to pay for this!’ he cried. ‘You could simply have said no—why have you damaged my eye?’

Ganga ran away from the river and hid behind her *guru*, Sansankhar, on the Mer-Sumer mountain.

‘My child! Why have you come here?’ he asked.

‘Gurudeva, I was bathing in the river. A wolf, hidden in the tall grass, saw me thus and asked me to marry him! As he babbled away, I lost my patience and hit him in the eye with a stone. His eye is damaged and now he is pursuing me! This is why I’ve come to you for protection.’ Having said this, she hid behind her *guru*’s back and toyed with her diamonds and pearls.

Meanwhile, the wolf had trailed her footsteps all the way to the Mer-Sumer mountain, and now stopped before her *guru*. ‘Ganga,’ he called, ‘I know you are hiding here. I am not going to let you off.’

‘Ganga,’ the *guru* intervened, ‘keep some holy ash in front of the wolf.’ And the wolf was burnt to ashes! ‘My child,’ commanded





Sansankhar, 'take this ash and float it in the river. It will be purified.'

Ganga took the ashes and washed them in the Ganges. The ash then spoke: 'You are a daughter-in-law of my house! This is why you purified the ashes.' Ganga went back to her abode in the thirteenth netherworld. A sal tree was born out of the ashes and its branches leaned towards the Ganges as it grew.

'Ganga, you are my wife! the tree called. 'This is why you wash my feet every day!'

'Oh my,' thought Ganga. 'That's precisely the opposite of what I've been doing. I must destroy this tree!' She went in spate. The sal tree was uprooted and floated down the river.

'You are my wife! That's why you have happily allowed me to swim in you.'

Ganga went in spate again and dumped the tree on to the earth. The tree lay on her banks. Thirteen years passed by.

One day Guru Sansankhar came down from the Mer-Sumer mountain for a bath in the Ganges. He touched the tree with his *chinta* and said, 'Awake, lord of fire, awake.' Thus invoked, Sat Kunwar (King Santanu) emerged from the steam of the *sal* tree.

'Speak, Santanu!'

'Gurudeva, take me to your holy fire.'

Sansankhar obliged.

Once on the Mer-Sumer mountain, Kunwar created a massive bow and arrow and killed a *titar*. As he was about to drop the dead bird in the holy fire, Gurudeva said, 'Killing birds is a great sin.'

'Baba, I will be guilty of this great sin, unless of course you bless me,' said Kunwar. Blessings were given.

'My *vaca* is immortal; it is the Brahma! If I'm wrong, I will die.'

'O master, the guru of Ganga, now you have given me your word!'

'Yes, I have.'

'Then get me married to Ganga.'

Gurudeva was troubled. 'Santanu, please ask for anything else.'

'I don't want anything else.' Sansankhar went up to the bank of





the Ganges. Ganga emerged from the thirteenth netherworld, circumambulated and greeted her guru. 'Give me your word—only then will I speak,' Ganga said. 'My *vaca* is immortal; it is the Brahma! If I'm wrong, I will die.'

'Ganga, I too have given my word to someone. Santanu wants to marry you.'

Ganga thought for a while and said, 'You should not have done this to me. But I cannot go back on a pledge to my guru. I am willing to marry Santanu, provided he makes me a pledge.'

'Santanu, are you willing to promise Ganga whatever she wants?' the Guru inquired.

'Yes, if she is willing to marry me.'

Ganga said, 'Whosoever is born to me, a boy or a girl, will have to be floated in the Ganges with your hands. You will have to immerse the child in me before you come back to me.' Santanu gave Ganga his word.

Ganga and Santanu stayed in Dudhiya Deval and managed the kingdom. Days passed thus. One night, some strange occurrences took place—the cocks left their place, and the queen, experiencing her menstrual period, was lost in her thoughts. When her period was complete, she called her maidservants.

'Why have you called us at this untimely juncture?' they asked.

'We will be late if we do not hurry,' she said. The sun will arise and the situation will change. Take one set of my clothes.' In her soft footwear, the queen moved slowly down the steps of the palace of clouds and went up to the Ratnakar ocean. She removed her diamonds and pearls, let her hair down and had herself rubbed with kesar oil. Then she bathed in the sea with her clothes on. Her maidservants watched their queen's waterplay from a distance. Dawn broke. The queen, bare-breasted, came out of the water, put on a fresh set of clothes and floated lazily back up to the palace of clouds.

She did her sixteen *sringars* and said to the king, 'Let us visit our mango grove and our garden.' The king adorned himself in his fine, golden silk *pitambar* headgear and serpent-head footwear, and the two descended from the palace of clouds into the mango grove. They





spent a lovely afternoon amidst the mangoes and the green grass. As the sun leaned towards the other side of the mountain, they returned and the queen put water in a giant copper vessel to heat for the king. Santanu took a long, hot bath and put on a fresh set of clothes.

Meanwhile, Ganga cooked a delicious meal with five delicacies. She herself served and fed Santanu. She did her sixteen sringars once again and made the bed, spreading *kasturi* and tiny flowers gently over it. The young king and queen lost themselves in each other and the night passed away in the celebration of love. Dawn broke. The king and queen offered prayers to the rising sun, but the queen began to feel nauseous.

Days passed, nine months passed, nine months and nine days passed by. The queen felt the child's movements in her belly. She woke the king and said, 'Get the midwife fast—the time has come.' The king ordered the maids, 'Get the old midwife immediately—do not delay.' The maids rushed.

The queen gave birth to a son. She said, 'O king, now do your duty.' Santanu wrapped the child in soft wool and went down to Dhavalgarh. He saw his son's face—the child was licking its toes. His eyes were sharp as a sword's edge and his face was like that of the moon.

'If I kill this child, I will have sinned for killing a baby, but I gave my word.' He threw the child on a slab of stone on the bank of the Ganges, and went back to the palace of clouds.

Gangeya was born first, followed by Chitravirya (Santar) and Vichitravirya (Vihag). All were given to the Ganges according to Santanu's pledge.

In the end a girl was born to them. Ganga said, 'O king, do not bring the girl into my presence, in front of my eyes. Do your own duty.' The king wrapped his daughter in wool and descended the steps of the palace of clouds. He walked out of the city. People said, 'O truthful king, if you float every one of your children in the Ganges, who will look after you in your old age?'

The king thought, 'These people are right. How can I kill my own daughter?' He looked at his daughter's face and thought, 'The





queen is back in the palace; she won't know what I do. And it is a great sin to kill one's own daughter.' The king reached the house of Gargar Satvadi, where he was warmly greeted and offered a seat of honour. The king told the guru about the promise he had made Ganga, then handed over his daughter and went back to Dudhiya Devala. Ganga was waiting for him. 'I am going for a bath in the Ratnakar,' she said, 'I'll be back soon.' She went down to the sea, greeted the water and decided to test the truth. She created rows of jowar and maize and prayed to her god, 'Please help the truth-seekers.' She looked at the grains—some had dried up.

Ganga returned to the palace of clouds and told her maids, 'Bathe the king in water heated in a gold vessel and get me some kesar oil.' The queen dressed in her best, did her sixteen sringars, and prepared for dinner. She served her husband a meal with five delicacies, and while feeding him she asked, 'How many of my children did you kill, O king?'

'My queen, I smashed our children and killed them all.'

The queen was shaken to her core by this lie. 'Did you float all the four in the Ganges?'

'Yes, I did.'

'O king, my relationship with you ends today. O king of truth, tell me the truth!'

'I did tell you the truth,' the king said.

The queen clapped thrice. A prince appeared on each clap. 'King, where is the princess? If you had floated the princess, she too would have come. You are a liar. Now there are no more ties between us. My children shall eat, drink and govern the kingdom. I am now free from the my promise to you.'

'Ganga, forgive me. I cannot live without you.'

'I know that you cannot live without me. But you cannot be mine in this life of mine now. I'll give you my bangle. I'll take another avatar. Come with this bangle to the kingdom of Rangaraja, and then I'll accept you again.' The king put his palm on the head of his disappearing Ganga, and five of her hairs came off in his hand.

Ganga now became a fish in the river. Indra of Indrapuri kept





watch over the seven seas, and twelve years passed thus. Indrani eventually wrote a letter, tied it to a peacock and said to the bird, 'Go to Indra.' The peacock flew over the seven seas and descended near Indra, who exclaimed, 'This peacock is from my house!' He picked Indrani's letter. As he read it, his phallus fell away from his body. He wrapped the phallus in a separate letter and sent the peacock back to Indrapuri.

The peacock grew thirsty halfway back to Indrapuri, and flew down to the sea to quench his thirst. As he drank, the phallus, which was tied to his neck, fell into the sea, and Ganga—now a fish—swallowed it. The peacock panicked, wondering, 'What will I now do? What will I tell Indrani?' He flew back to Indrapuri and said to Indrani, 'Indra tied something to my neck, but it fell away when I bent down for a drink of water.' Indrani grew worried.

Back across the sea, a fisherman cast his net and, as luck would have it, caught Ganga. The fish said, 'I don't mind that you have caught me, but do not put a price on me. I'll name my own price. If anyone asks, tell him the fish will name her own price.'

The fisherman went to the marketplace in town. When someone asked whether he wanted to sell the fish, he said yes.

'Tell us the price.'

'That will be named by the fish.'

'Are you mad? Have you ever heard a fish speak?' The fisherman wandered from one marketplace to another and became a laughing stock.

Eventually, he came to a place where King Rangaraja was sitting. The king asked him, 'O fisherman, do you want to sell this fish?'

'Yes, my lord.'

'Tell me the price.'

'My lord, the price is whatever the fish says.'

'Are you out of your mind? Dead fish do not speak! Tell me the price.'

'My lord, whatever the fish says.'

'The dead fish speaks—absolutely amazing! There is certainly





more to this fish than meets the eye.’ The king asked the fish to name her price. She did, the king bought her and the fisherman was dismissed.

Then the fish told the king, ‘Do not eat me today. Let nine months and nine days pass, then you can open me up.’ After nine months and nine days the fish was opened and a girl child emerged. The girl started growing up in the king’s house.

Back in the palace of clouds, Santanu fell ill. He did not die but he did not get well either. He frequently muttered something like, ‘Virgin girl—virgin girl.’ His eldest son, Prince Gangeya, then said, ‘Father, you neither get well nor die! Tell me, what ails you?’

‘My son, I’ll die only when you get me married to a virgin girl. I have this bangle of gold—take it and go to the court of King Rangaraja.’ All three brothers went to the court and showed the bangle to Rangaraja, saying, ‘Our father is pining for a virgin girl.’

‘I have a daughter,’ Rangaraja said, ‘but she is not mine.’ The girl saw the bangle in the brothers’ hands and said, ‘Father, Santanu is not well on my account. Please marry me to him.’

‘My child, Santanu is about to die. What would you achieve by marrying him?’

‘Whatever is willed is willed. Please marry me to King Santanu.’ Thus Santanu was engaged. The brothers returned carrying ritual gifts to announce the marriage, and created a palanquin.

King Santanu went to the court of Rangaraja, took the wedding rounds and began to die, saying, ‘My children, I am now going to be free. Cremate me only on virgin land.’ Santanu died. The three brothers took their father’s body and went in search of virgin land, but could not find any and grew fatigued.

Along the way they ran into the Lord Himself. The Lord said, ‘There is a lake full of gems in this forest; a swan has just given birth there. You will find the virgin land just beneath the swan.’

The brothers went over to the lake and pleaded with the swan to come out with her offspring so they could cremate Santanu on virgin soil. The swan said, ‘Will you return the land to me or will you become its owners?’





‘We will return the land to you,’ they said. They cremated King Santanu on the virgin land and there established the city of Hastinapura, then returned to the palace of the clouds.

After a ritual bath, they went back to the palace of King Rangaraja and Gangeya spoke thus: ‘Having married off our father, we will now leave your daughter here, only because if we take her with us she will be unhappy.’

‘Well,’ said Rangaraja, ‘your father attained *moksha*, but he did perform the marriage rites with my daughter. By rights, my daughter is now your mother, and I therefore leave her in your hands.’

The brothers went home with their mother and pondered the question of who would take care of her. ‘Gangeya,’ one brother said, ‘you are the eldest, so you should take care of her.’ Gangeya started looking after the girl assiduously—and Chitravirya and Vichitravirya grew suspicious. ‘Gangeya never ever comes out of mother’s chambers!’ they thought. ‘What kind of a looking after is this?’ One evening, as night fell, they peeped inside their mother’s chambers. Gangeya was sitting at the foot of the bed, while their mother slept peacefully on it. Her leg hung off the bed, and Gangeya thought, ‘If her leg hangs like this the whole night, she will be troubled. But if I touch her I will have sinned. He put his loincloth on his head, then lifted her leg with his covered head and gently placed her leg back on the bed.

His mother woke up. ‘O my son, I have troubled you.’

‘No, my mother, it is my mistake. I had to wake you up or your hanging leg would have troubled you, and I could not touch you without committing a sin.’

‘O son, you are my dutiful son!’ Chitra and Vichitra saw all this and were ashamed—sinful thoughts had crossed their minds. ‘We have committed a grave mistake,’ they said. ‘How do we rid ourselves of this sin?’

They inquired with the elders and were told, ‘Ask Gangeya. He is a moral man.’ They went to their brother and said, vaguely, ‘People always ask us: how does one get rid of sin?’

Gangeya replied, ‘At the confluence of twelve rivers lies a bountiful





pipal tree. A fair cow sits beneath the tree, and Lord Mahadeva dwells nearby. Do proper meditation there and then burn the pipal tree. That is the only way to rid oneself of sin.'

The brothers set out on the journey. They passed through one region after another, entered the forest and found the temple of Koteswar Mahadeva. They looked around but decided this was definitely not the place Gangeya had mentioned. When they reached Dan Mahudi, they smoked some hashish and chewed some tobacco, then continued their journey. Finally, they came to Gun Bhankhari near Choch Delwada, where the great tribal fair takes place, and here they could see what they were looking for—this was indeed the confluence of twelve rivers and there was the pipal tree. A Mahadeva temple stood nearby. They meditated for some time, then entered the tree. Inside the tree they found a Solanki from the village of Pinchi. 'Friend,' they said, 'please cremate us alive.' The Solanki said, 'You are liars. Therefore I cannot cremate you alive.' They repeated their request to Matara Pargi, from Matara village, and the Pargi cremated them alive. The brothers merged with the pipal tree.

Many years passed. One day the wives of Chitra and Vichitra asked their foster mother-in-law, 'We have no children. What do we do now?'

'My child, in the first rays of the rising sun, appear nude before Gangeya.' One queen thus appeared before Gangeya, covering her eyes with her hands. She gave birth to a blind prince. The other queen covered her privates as she appeared before Gangeya. She gave birth to a prince named Pandu.

Dhritarastra, the blind prince, was granted the kingdom of Dhavalgarh, and Pandu was granted the kingdom of Hastinapura.

Gandhari and Kunti

The seven seers were meditating in the forest, having stuck a trident in the holy fire and vowed to meditate for twelve years. Sivasakti learned of the seven seers' vow of meditation and decided to break it. He transformed himself into an eagle, then climbed into the heavens and flew over the four continents. Finally, the eagle sat atop





the trident and the trident pierced into her, killing her in the sacred fire of the seven seers.

After thirteen years the seers opened their eyes and saw the eagle impaled on the trident. They thought, 'This is our bad luck—an eagle has perished over our holy fire. A wrong deed has been committed in this world.' With a bunch of country flowers and leaves in their hands, they got up from the holy fire and put the flowers and leaves over the dead eagle. Out of the skeleton of the eagle emerged a girl named Gandhari, and out of the eagle's flesh and blood emerged a girl named Kunti. The virgin girls started growing.

A great day of tumultuous events dawned. The sun, in its gentle grandeur, was already up when Kunti realized that there was no drinking water and went with a pot on her head to fetch some. With a pot on her head and a silk rope in her hands, Kunti went to the Khanda lake where she cleaned her teeth and entered the lake to bathe. She bowed to the Sun God. The Sun God was besotted by the beautiful, half-dressed Kunti; the rays of the sun thus penetrated Kunti and entered her womb.

A calamity struck the dark chamber: Kunti was pregnant. The pregnancy grew minute by minute, and finally the child came out of her forehead. Kunti caught her son in her sari and kissed him. She said, 'My son, I am a virgin. You should not have happened like this. It would blemish the guru if I took you to his holy fire.' Kunti went into the fields of Gokal Garh and dug a pit. She placed her son in the pit and said, 'My son, stay here and be happy. Grow up to be a great man. Come help me if the enemies wake up.' Karna's face was as beautiful as the moon, his eyes were like a sword's edge and his nose like the flame of a lamp. The child smiled at his mother and Kunti was overwhelmed as she bid adieu to her son. 'Sun, he is your ray—look after him,' she said as she covered the pit with a stone slab. She then said, 'O mother earth, now you look after my son. I am free and you are responsible for Karna.' With small, lingering steps, Kunti turned back.

'I cannot go to the guru's holy fire in this condition,' she thought. She took a bath, purified herself, filled her pot with drinking water and went to the ashram.





One day the seven seers thought, ‘These girls are no longer appropriate in our ashram—they have grown up. We must find a suitable household for them. They gave away Gandhari to Dhritarastra and Kunti to Pandu. They blessed the girls, saying, ‘Gandhari shall bear seventy-eight children and they will govern Dhavalgarh. Kunti shall bear five sons and they will rule Hastinapura.’

‘You give me only five sons?’ said Kunti.

‘Go,’ they instructed her. ‘Lift that cake of cow dung.’ Kunti did as she was told, and as she lifted the cow dung she found innumerable insects beneath it. Suddenly, a scorpion came along and killed all the insects. ‘We are giving you five sons as powerful as the scorpion,’ said the seers. ‘You don’t have to worry.’

Pandu Raja was ruling at Hastinapura and Dhritarastra was ruling at Dhavalgarh. Kunti was experiencing her menstrual period. When her period was complete, she called her maidservants.

‘We will be late if we do not hurry,’ she said. ‘The sun will come out and the situation will change. Take one set of my clothes.’ In her soft footwear, the queen moved slowly down the steps of the palace of clouds and went up to the Ratnakar. She removed her diamonds and pearls, let her hair down and had herself rubbed with kesar oil. Then she bathed in the sea with her clothes on. Her maidservants watched their queen’s waterplay from a distance.

When Kunti came out of the water, bare-breasted, Yamaraja nearly drowned in her beauty. He penetrated her with his rays. Kunti put on her blouse and started vomiting; once again her dark womb was full of danger. She put on her diamonds and returned to the palace of clouds, climbing the steps with difficulty. The maids had kept her bed ready, and she lay down. Suddenly she desired thirty-two varieties of sweets; the maids brought the sweets from the market and fed the queen.

Months passed. Kunti’s stomach swelled. She felt heavy, and her movements were restricted. The maids fed her in bed with the five delicacies. Nine months and nine days passed. Kunti felt the labour pangs and could not sleep all night.





Then a beautiful day dawned, with the Sun God, the lord of the earth, shining in all his glory. Kunti called out for her maids and fifteen, instead of one, ran up to her. Carrying out her commands, they ran down the steps of the palace of clouds and called to the old midwife, 'Wake up if you are sleeping, and come out if you are awake.'

The midwife got up from her bed and came out, 'Why have you called me out at this early hour in the morning?'

'The queen's labour pangs have begun. Come quickly with us to the palace of clouds—don't be lax or we'll be too late.' The old midwife climbed the steps of the palace of clouds with her walking stick. A bed was prepared and the queen's belly was massaged with oil. The queen gave birth to a son and named him Dharmaraja.

Out of the union of Kunti with the God of Fire, Arjun was born. From her union with the God of the Winds, Bhima was born. Out of her worship of Mahadeva, Sahadeva was born, and out of her worship of Lord Indra, Nakul was born.

The heads of the Pandavas were like ripe coconuts. Their eyes were the edges of swords, and their brows were like the wings of a fly. Their noses were as straight as fire, and their hands were as red as the pipal stem. Their legs were like the pillars of a temple, and their backs were as straight as the summit of Mount Abu.

Panduraja

One day the sun set in the west and the birds returned to their nests, auguring well for the hauntingly beautiful dusk. King Pandu, asleep, dreamt of Amra, lord of the hunt. Amra said to him, 'Go for a hunt on the Mer-Sumer mountain.'

Dawn broke yellow and gold the next day. The hen left its place and wandered around, and the pleasant morning sun shone. King Pandu did his daily chores, offered a prayer to the sun and started off on his hunt. He carried a bow weighing thirteen *man* and arrows weighing twelve *mun*. The king camped on the Mer-Sumer mountain but did not find game, neither boar nor deer.

At noon the heat rose and the earth was as hot as an oven. The king was extremely thirsty. He followed the footsteps of animals to





the Khanda lake, where he had a pit dug on the shore and hid himself, waiting for game.

It so happened that, at this time, a seer had been lost in meditation for twelve years. During this time his holy fire had been guarded day and night by a pair of deer. In his thirteenth year of meditation, the seer opened his eyes. 'You have helped me complete this meditation without hindrance for the last twelve years,' he said to the deer. 'I am pleased with you. I grant you this kingdom of the forest.'

The deer, after receiving these blessings, came over to the Khanda lake for a drink of water. The deer couple had observed celibacy for twelve years, and now, overcome with love, they kissed passionately and began to make love. Pandu, watching them, took careful aim and shot them dead with his arrow.

As she died, the female deer cursed Pandu: 'O king, we were mating after twelve years when you violently interrupted us. Now you shall also die while making love.'

'It seems I have committed a fatal mistake,' thought Pandu. 'These two were seers, not animals. I have sinned.'

The king returned to Hastinapura, reclined on his bed and died according to the curse.

The Pandavas lamented: 'Our father is dead.' Kunti said, 'My sons, the king's *karma* resulted in his death. Dig a pit in the garden and give him a burial.' The Pandavas observed the twelfth day in all humility.

The Pandavas were the first living gods on earth; everyone else is a mere human being. Their kingdom was replete with wealth and splendor.

One day the Pandavas went out on a hunt. They carried a bow weighing thirteen munn and arrows weighing twelve munn. The brothers wandered around the forest but did not come across wild boar or other game. They then went to the Kadali forest, where they found a young maiden. 'Lady, who are you?' they asked. 'Where do you hail from and where are you off to?'

'Why do you ask these questions? I hail from a far-off land. What do you want with me?'





‘We want to take you to Hastinapura. You will become the daughter-in-law of the house. From today on, you will eat and drink with us.’ The Pandavas returned to Hastinapura with Draupadi and gave her a seven-storey palace for her stay.

Karna Pandava

One fine morning Dubla, the gardener, and Mansa, his consort, were engaged in animated conversation. ‘Mali,’ Mansa said, ‘go to the court of the Kauravas and ask our king to give us one field, one well and one pitful of compost.’ Dubla Mali, making short strides in his torn shoes, started off towards the court of the Kauravas. He left the marketplace behind him and was soon ascending the steps of the palace of clouds. His heart was in his mouth and his legs were tottering. He entered the court, gleaming with the splendour of the Kauravas, and stood in a corner. Thick carpets were spread on the floor. The small-eyed, thin-moustached nobles were engaged in self-serving discussion.

The mali prostrated himself to greet the king and stood up. The Kauravas were silent and the mali was tongue-tied. Finally, standing on one leg, the mali said, ‘King, I am your subject and I am poor. Master, please grant my request—give me one well and one field.’

‘Mali, your request is granted. A field and a well are given to you,’ said Duryodhan.

Thus encouraged, the mali said, ‘Master, do grant me a pitful of compost, too.’

‘Mali, the village common land contains plenty of soil and compost. Dig your pit wherever you please.’

The mali prostrated himself before the king and floated down the steps of the palace of clouds. Mansa Malin saw the mali’s fast-approaching steps and thought, ‘The king has definitely granted him something.’

The mali sat on their bed and said, ‘Give me some water to drink.’

When the mali had drunk water Mansa asked him, ‘Mali, what did the king say? Did he grant us something or not?’





‘The king gave us a well, a field and a pitful of compost.’

‘Let us not delay any longer—let us go and have a look at our well.’ They went outside and found a well and a suitable field, which they decided to plough. Malin said, ‘The god has not granted us sons or daughters, but the king has granted us this field and a well. Now we can eat and survive till we have strength.’

While Dubla Mali acquired a water wheel from Kathiawar, Mansa Malin prepared a sumptuous meal of thirty-two courses. While the two ate, they agreed, ‘The monsoon is upon us—now is the time to manure the fields. Let us hire a cart from Kunbi Patel. Any delay will be fatal.’

Mali went over to the Kunbi settlement and hired a cart. He told the malin to get a shovel and container and they were on their way, pulled by the white bulls towards the fields. Once on the outskirts, they identified the biggest pile of soil and manure in the field, and started shoveling the soil and manure—the mali filled the container and the malin emptied it into the cart. Then the mali went to the fields to manure them.

Mansa gathered the remaining manure into a heap. While sweeping it up she came across a huge slab of stone, which she could only lift by tying her sari around it. When she finally moved the slab aside, she found a child in a pit beneath it.

When Mali had finished manuring the fields, Mansa Malin said, ‘I’ll tell you something close to my heart. I have not conceived a boy or a girl, but things have changed in our old age. Come, let me show you this child.’ Mali came to the pit and saw the grinning child licking its toes. They brought the child home and prepared him a bed, then laid him gently on it. Mansa Malin said to the mali, ‘Go to the trader and get me some joss sticks and turmeric powder,’ and while he was gone she heated some water in a copper vessel and tenderly bathed the child. He was adorned in fresh clothes and placed back in the cradle.

One auspicious day, Mansa Malin lit the joss sticks and prayed to God. ‘O Lord, I was born a barren woman. You have now given us this beautiful child in our old age. Now how can I ensure his growth





without feeding him proper milk? Fill my dry breasts with milk—please help us, O Lord!’

The god granted Mansa this boon, and as her breasts filled with milk, Malin picked up her child and fed him. The child, named Karna, grew and began to play in the courtyard, then to wander in the marketplace.

One day the boy went to the fields with the white hulk and started the water wheel. The bulls pulled the wheel and the water flowed in the channel. A giant elephant from the Kaurava court of Dhavalgarh came by and drank all of the water from the water channel. The mali’s son warned the king’s cowherd, ‘Take your elephant away from here! He’s drinking all of our water, and our garden is getting parched.’ The cowherd paid no attention and the mali’s son grew furious. ‘Please listen to me and take your elephant to the sea, otherwise some wrong deed may happen.’ But the cowherd still refused. Karna, now red-hot with anger, came over to where the elephant was, removed the elephant’s chain and hit him on the head. The head was severed and fell into the sea, and the body fell into the well. Satisfied with his killing of the king’s elephant, Karna again went back to urging the bulls to pull the water wheel.

The cowherd trembled with fear. Utterly terrorized, he ran to the court and fell down in front of the king. The king’s court was in session, with all its courtiers conversing amongst themselves, and the cowherd disrupted the solemn atmosphere.

King Duryodhan asked the cowherd, ‘Who has beaten you? Tell me his name.’

Trembling, the cowherd said, ‘O king, our magnificent elephant is dead. The mali’s son cut him in two.’

‘Are you mad, cowherd? A small child cannot kill an elephant.’

‘Master, come and see for yourself if you don’t believe me. Our elephant’s head floats in the sea, and its body is in the mali’s well.’

‘Brothers, prepare an army,’ said the king. ‘Teach that fellow, who has dared kill our elephant, a lesson.’

The Kauravas set off with their army towards the fields. When they reached the mali’s property, they said to the youth at the water





wheel, 'Our magnificent elephant never got up after taking a beating from a rod weighing twenty-five *mans*. We want to know who killed it.'

Karna replied, 'Your elephant was feasting on our well water, and our garden was losing its greenness. That is why I killed him, and if you fear as much for your life, go away or you will suffer the same fate.'

The Kauravas were taken by surprise. 'Look at this small child talking like this!' they said. On one side were seventy-eight Kauravas with their army, and on the other was Karna Pandava. Karna readied his bow and shot.

The Kauravas thought, 'This is not an ordinary arrow. This belongs to the Pandavas. The boy cannot be the mali's son.' The Kauravas and their entire army ran away. The mali, a silent spectator as he watered the plants, was wonderstruck.

Having witnessed the power of Karna Pandava, the Kauravas returned to their king. Duryodhan thought, 'This brave and powerful young man would be of great help in a calamity.' Karna was immediately appointed commander-in-chief of the army and granted the kingdom of Gokulgarh.

Dubla Mali said to Mansa, 'Malin, our boy appears to be the prince of some great king. He is the son of a brave man.' The mali and malin threw themselves at Karna's feet and asked for forgiveness.

The people, impressed by Karna's brilliance and bravery, named the young man Kiran Kunwar.

Draupadi and Vasuki

It was a hot afternoon. Draupadi was in a deep sleep, snoring softly. Her maidservants were combing her golden hair. When one hair broke, the maidservants were terrified. 'The queen will kill us if she wakes up,' they said. 'The laws of the Pandavas are very strict.' They tied the broken hair to a palace window.

The wind saw the hair and thought, 'Now I'll work some wonders! Let me show off my talents!' As the fierce wind blew, the hair fell down to the earth. The earth could not bear its weight, so the





hair opened its way to the netherworld.

Vasuki, king of the netherworld, was sleeping, having taken a vow of twelve years penance. The snake-goddesses were fanning him. Draupadi's golden hair fell suddenly on his chest, and he woke with a start. He reached on to his chest and took the hair in his hands. 'This cannot belong to a man, that's for sure,' he thought. 'This belongs to a woman.' He got up and opened the seventh basement.

The queens thought, 'The king is preparing to go down to the earth.' They asked Vasuki, 'O king, where are you preparing to go?'

The king replied, 'O my queens, I have found this golden hair. I am going to the earth in search of the woman with the golden hair.'

'O king, do not get involved with this woman! As it is, life is full of difficulties. We should not commit mistakes. We will keep you happy in bed for twelve years—let us enjoy each other in the netherworld only.' Vasuki replied, 'O queens, don't worry. I'll just have a look at the woman with the golden hair and come right back.' The king adorned himself with sixteen sringars, and amidst the moaning of his queens, whipped his horse and began his journey from the netherworld to the earth.

In a storm of rising dust, the horse and his rider arrived on the earth. As the horse crossed a grassy plateau, the king wondered where to go next. He turned towards the west, and the wind-speeded horse flew across the earth. The king passed through many a city and marketplace but could not find the woman with the golden hair. Finally, he arrived at a lake and there he rested his horse and tried to relax, to no avail. However, he suddenly spotted the palace of clouds in Hastinapura, far away. He mounted his horse once again and whipped him towards Hastinapura. As he entered the main city gate, he was greeted with auspicious signs. He left the horse in the garden, and with a whip in his hand King Vasuki, king of the netherworld, walked towards the palace of clouds.

Queen Draupadi was enjoying a swing in her palace. The sunlight from the window illuminated her hair. Vasuki suddenly saw the golden light and his hair bristled with joy. His speed automatically increased, and he started climbing the steps to the





palace of clouds. The steps began to tremble. From her swing, Draupadi spotted him climbing the palace steps, and she said to her maids, 'Some unknown guest has forgotten the way to the court and is coming here to the palace of clouds. Go, show him the way to the court.' The maids ran towards the entrance and stopped King Vasuki, who was advancing with a whip in his hand and joy in his heart.

'Stranger,' they said, 'you have forgotten the way to the court. This is the queen's residence. Come, we'll escort you to the court of the Pandavas.'

'Get out of my way. I want to go to the queen's quarters only.' When the maids refused to budge, Vasuki forced his way inside, proclaiming, 'I was born and bred by women only.' Arjun's queen, on her golden swing, thought, 'This appears to be some obstinate noble who refuses to heed the maids.' She started towards the inner quarters, but Vasuki reached there in the meantime, and with a flick of his whip encircled her waist. Draupadi fell down, her golden hair now visible. King Vasuki, surprised, fell on the queen.

'I don't know who is your wife, and you don't know who is my husband. Why have you fallen upon an unknown woman?' she demanded. 'You scoundrel!' When the Pandavas hear about this, you will be killed! Run away from here if you value your life!

Vasuki lifted Draupadi and laid her down on the bed. Then the king of the netherworld said, 'I have been hungry for you for so many days, my queen. Now go heat some water and bathe me.'

'Where have you come from, brute? Aren't you ashamed to talk in such a manner to a woman you don't know?' The king stared at her angrily. Now afraid, Queen Draupadi heated some water and the king took a bath, then adorned himself with the sixteen types of srīngars and ordered the queen to prepare thirty-two kinds of delicacies as his meal for the day. The queen, out of fear, prepared the food, and served the food on a plate of gold. The king, reclining on the bed, was fed by the queen. The queen in the meantime thought, 'Where has this obstinate guest come from?' She said to the king, 'You look like a guest from a strange land. Now go immediately back to where you came from.'





‘A man does not just turn around like that!’ the king insisted. ‘I’ll stay the night in this palace only.’

The court of the Pandavas was about to end. Draupadi thought, ‘The master of the house is coming home.’ But King Vasuki told her, ‘Don’t be afraid—let your husband come.’

Arjun returned after the court had finished for the day, and his steps shook the pillars of the palace of clouds. He climbed the steps to the queen’s palace, and as soon he saw the king of the netherworld, he took him in his powerful arms and a duel ensued. The two men went down to the netherworld, came up to the earth and ascended to the heavens with the wind. At last Vasuki prevailed over Arjun, pinning him down and tying him with a hair from his moustache. He hung Arjun on a rod in front of Arjun’s own bed.

The queen spread a soft quilt on the bed, spread flowers on the quilt and sprinkled *kasturi* on the flowers. King Vasuki and Queen Draupadi sat on the bed, then made love and lost themselves in lust while Arjun, hanging from the rod, just watched. The king and the queen slept in each other’s arms while poor Arjun looked on helplessly.

A pleasant dawn broke, and the cocks left their place. Vasuki said to Draupadi, ‘O queen! Now I’ll come every evening and go back by dawn. The one who will kill me is yet to be born. We will eat, drink and enjoy ourselves.’ On his way back that morning, Vasuki removed his shining sword from its scabbard and cut the hair that had tied Arjun. Arjun fell to the floor and the king of the netherworld glided down the steps of the palace of clouds. He went to his horse in the garden, spurred the horse with his stick and the seafaring horse made its way to the netherworld.

When Arjun fell, the sound of his falling reverberated in the palace. Draupadi ran to Arjun, caressed him, and helped him to the bed; then she heated some water and bathed him; and finally she fed him the thirty-two kinds of delicacies. Arjun said, ‘O Queen! Will this really be the daily routine? It might be good for you, but it will cause my bones to break. For how long will I have to suffer this? Today when the enemy comes, try to fathom some way to kill him.’





Draupadi said, 'Let him at least come over.'

Vasuki made his way back to the netherworld. The seven lotus-poised queens prepared the thirty-two delicacies and lingered around the king, seeking an opportunity to feed him. The king, however, did not even look at them. He took the first helping in his mouth and said, 'There are stones in this food. You have put excessive chilli in my vegetable.'

The queens moaned, 'O king, now that you are accustomed to someone else's food, you will not like our food any more!' The king whiled away the day as best he could.

Dusk fell. The king brought out his fast horse, readied him and mounted. The queens said, 'O my king! The other woman's bed is never good!' The king paid no attention; he urged the horse with his spurs, and the horse galloped towards Hastinapura.

Good omens greeted the king as he entered the gates of Hastinapura. He tied and fed his horse and started climbing the palace of clouds. When Draupadi saw the king on the steps, she put on the water for heating. As soon as she saw Vasuki she said, 'Come—the hot water is ready for you.' As Draupadi bathed the king she burst out crying.

The king asked, 'O my queen, which sadness has caused this crying, these tears? Tell me the name of he who has caused these tears.' The queen shed huge tears on the king and told him, 'O king, I'll tell you something dear to my heart. I do not think of anything but you these days. But the political system of the Pandavas is cruel. What will I do if they kill you? I love you so much! I am crying for fear of the Pandavas.' Vasuki said, 'Queen! Stop crying. Prepare the thirty-two delicacies. Let us eat and talk in bed.' The king reclined on the bed and the queen prepared their thirty-two course dinner. She served the food on the gold plate and fed the king in bed. The king, half-sitting and reclining, ate in bed.

'Queen, the Pandavas have no courage before me. I am not afraid of the Pandavas. But yes, I do fear Karna. In fact I am quite afraid of Karna.' The queen lay in the king's arms and learned the secret of his death.





A yellow dawn broke. The king of the netherworld sat up in bed, wielded his shining sword and cut the hair to which Arjun was tied. Arjun fell to the earth with a thud.

Documented by Bhagvandas Patel

Translated by Ajay Dandekar

Bhasha



From the Kunkana Ramayan

Hail, Lord Mahadeva, hail Lord Sahadeva,
Hail, O Goddess Earth
Hail, Goddess of the Seven Hills
Who can fathom God's deeds?

There once lived six robbers on the face of the earth. They lived happily. They lived like kings.

They lived like kings, O my master.
They lived like kings, O my master.

There once lived six robbers on the face of the earth. Five were healthy and whole in body, but the sixth robber was deformed. He was crippled—he possessed neither arms nor legs. The five healthy brothers took care of their deformed sibling.

O, how you cared for him, O Brothers!
And how he enjoyed it all, the crippled brother!

The five healthy brothers used to rob to provide for the crippled brother. Day after day passed by. Month after month passed by. Year after year passed by. Eventually, the five brothers began to think, 'The five of us have to rob, have to break open safes to provide for our deformed sibling. Some day all five of us shall get caught, and we shall be killed, slaughtered or perhaps even hanged. This brother of ours is a parasite, a burden, good for nothing. We are not going to spend the rest of our lives looking after him. It is a thankless obligation.'

Thus spoke the five brothers





Thus spoke the five brothers

One day, the five brothers came home after having spent the whole day robbing and stealing, and took up the matter with their deformed sibling. ‘Look brother, day after day has gone by. Month after month has gone by. Year after year has gone by. How much longer are we going to provide for you? And *how* are we going to provide for you? We have taken care of your every need. We have performed your morning ablutions. We have fed you and nourished you. For how long are we going to serve you? God has made everyone whole—so why are you deformed? Go back to that very same God who has brought you into existence. Ask him to make you whole. From now on we are not going to provide for you. Deformed brother, go now and come back whole.’

Thus spoke the five brothers

Thus spoke the five brothers

The deformed child tried to get up, fell down and cried. ‘Oh God, I have neither arms nor legs,’ he thought. ‘Where shall I go now? How shall I live? What shall I do?’ The deformed one thought the matter over and cried profusely. Then he made up his mind to approach Lord Shiva. He meditated on Lord Shiva and made his way to his abode.

My deformed child thus meditated

My deformed child thus meditated

The deformed one meditated on Lord Shiva and left his palace behind to make his way towards Mount Kailash. He left the far end of his village behind and stumbled over thorns and pebbles, dead stumps and mountains on his way to Mount Kailash. He found his way to Mount Kailash.

O my brother, how he stumbled

On his way to Mount Kailash

On his way to Mount Kailash

On his way he encountered many palaces, many outskirts of





villages. But he left these behind and made his way to Mount Kailash, wandering through thick forests, climbing over hills, plodding through vales. As he made his way through field, forest and hedgerow, he heard peacocks warbling in the forests. At last he reached Mount Kailash and paused for rest. Then he began to climb the seven steps.

He climbed the seven steps, O my brother

He climbed the seven steps, O my brother

Though he possessed neither arms nor legs, he succeeded in climbing the seven steps, praise be to the Lord! On reaching the top of Mount Kailash, the child picked his way to the abode of God.

O, my deformed child thus made his way

O, my deformed child thus made his way

When he reached the palace on Mount Kailash, he encountered a large, black cobra. Leaving it behind, the child fell at the feet of a cow. At that moment Lord Shiva noticed him and immediately rushed to him. Lord Shiva assumed the shape of the *lingam* near the knees of the cow and fell into the child's path.

Thus fell my Lord Shiva

Thus fell my Lord Shiva

The deformed child instantly recognized the lingam. 'O God,' he thought, 'this is the Shiva lingam. I shall worship it in order to reach Lord Shiva.' The child began a penance in the vicinity of the Shiva lingam.

The child thus offered penance

The child thus offered penance

The child offered penance day after day, month after month. He thus offered penance for twelve long years.

O Lord Shiva, he thus completed his penance

O Lord Shiva, he thus completed his penance

At the end of the child's penance, Lord Shiva appeared before





him. Lord Shiva asked him, ‘O child, O boy, where are you going? And what do you desire?’

The child answered, ‘I aimed to reach you, for I desire something from you. First of all, you must give me a promise.’

Thus spoke the child, O my brother

Thus spoke the child, O my brother

The deformed child said, ‘O Lord Shiva, you have given arms and legs to every human being. So why have you deprived me of my limbs? Please make me whole.’

Lord Shiva replied, ‘Listen, O child, listen O boy. I shall grant you arms and legs. Come home with me.’ Lord Shiva strode ahead and the deformed child stumbled after him.

Thus the deformed child made his way

Thus the deformed child made his way

When they reached the abode of Lord Shiva, the Lord lay down to rest on a cool mattress and addressed the deformed child.

‘O child, I shall truly grant you arms and legs. But right now, I have some work to attend to. As soon as my work is finished, I shall grant your wish for arms and legs.’

Thus spoke my Lord Shiva

Thus spoke my Lord Shiva

‘O child, rest quietly over here. There are many rooms in this palace. You may enter the room to the west or you may enter the room to the east, but you must not enter the room to the south, for that will mean death. There is a huge bee in that room, which will pluck out your eyes and feed on them. It will most certainly kill you.’

Thus spoke my Lord Shiva

Thus spoke my Lord Shiva

Having said this, Lord Shiva descended towards the earth, which was then passing through *Kaliyug*. Left to himself, the deformed child began to think: ‘I have offered penance to Lord Shiva for twelve long





years, yet he has not granted my wish. Therefore, I shall deliberately enter the room to the south. Let the black bee inside the room pluck out my eyes and feed on them. Let it kill me. Let Lord Shiva be blamed for this sin.'

Thus spoke the deformed child

Thus spoke the deformed child

The deformed child stumbled towards the southern room. He reached the entrance, opened the door and went in. But there was no black bee in the room—instead, there was a pool of nectar. The child fell into the pool and began to drown. He swallowed nine sips of nectar and it travelled all the way down to his navel. Who can fathom God's deeds? After swallowing the nectar, the child sprouted nine more heads on his shoulders, and eighteen arms where there had been none. His body matured rapidly to adult size. He began to splash around in the pool of nectar. Bravo! Bravo! Ten heads and eighteen arms. Splashing around in the pool, the boy emerged as a young man. Bravo! Bravo! Ten heads and eighteen arms. Choked with emotion, he began to laugh aloud. What could be the mystery behind the sprouting of nine heads and eighteen arms?

In the meantime, Lord Shiva returned from his mission on the earth. He was astounded at the child's transformation. 'O child, O boy, what have you done?' he cried. 'What has occurred in my absence?'

'Lord, you lied to me. I had wanted to die, but there was no bee in that room, I pushed open the door and fell into the room, and I found what looked like a pool of water. I swallowed nine sips of the liquid, and all at once sprouted nine heads and eighteen arms. I have turned into a monster! O Lord, I never wanted to assume such a shape. I only wanted one head, two arms and two legs.'

Lord Shiva said, 'O child, be patient. Don't be afraid.'

Thus spoke Lord Shiva, O my brother

Thus spoke Lord Shiva, O my brother

'O child, God is pleased with you. That is why this has occurred.'





‘But Lord, this does not suit me! How shall I provide for myself once I go back to earth?’

Lord Shiva replied, ‘O boy, do not be afraid. Henceforth you shall be known as Ravana.’

‘What did you say?’

‘Your name, henceforth, is Ravana.’

‘Bravo! Bravo! Now I have an appropriate name. But Lord, how shall I provide for myself once I go back to earth?’

Thus spoke the child (now grown into man), O my brother

Thus spoke the child (now grown into man), O my brother

‘O Ravana! Mountains shall perish, but you shall not. Go—I grant you the throne of Lanka and its neighbouring regions. I grant you the throne of the golden land of Lanka. What do you have to say to this?’

‘O Lord, I shall certainly go to Lanka, but I shall need some support.’

‘Go—I grant you the protection of two deities, Ahi the serpent and Mahi the cow.’

Thus spoke the Lord, O my Brother

Thus spoke the Lord, O my Brother

‘The two deities, Ahi the snake and Mahi the cow, shall aid you. Henceforth, you are the king of Lanka.’

Choked with emotion, Ravana began to laugh. He rose up as a deity, then left the house and walked away.

Thus you walked away, Lord Ravana

Thus you walked away, Lord Ravana

As he left Shiva’s abode, Ravana encountered Shiva’s chaste and devoted wife, Queen Parvati, walking towards him with a pot of water. Garbed in silver, carrying a pot made of gold, Queen Parvati was climbing the steps of Mount Kailash.

Thus arrived God’s maiden, Queen Parvati





Thus arrived God's maiden, Queen Parvati

Outstanding in appearance, this maiden was one in a million, the chaste and devoted Queen Parvati. Ravana could not take his eyes off her.

Bearing the golden pot, Parvati entered the abode of Lord Shiva. Ravana began to think, 'Lord Shiva has granted me the throne of Lanka and given me the support of two deities, Ahi and Mahi. But when I go back to earth, who shall marry me?' Thinking thus, Lord Ravana went back.

Thus Lord Ravana went back

Thus Lord Ravana went back

As soon as Lord Shiva saw Ravana, he came out of his house. 'Lord Ravana,' he said, 'why have you come back? Have you forgotten something? You can ask for whatever you want. Wealth, prosperity, gold, silver, whatever you wish.'

'O Lord, I shall certainly ask for what I desire. But first you must make me a promise.'

Lord Shiva made the promise

Lord Shiva made the promise

Ravana demanded an oath in the name of his parents, and Lord Shiva repeated, 'You may ask for whatever you desire.'

Ravana replied, 'God, you have given me everything. But when I go back to the world of mortals, who shall be willing to marry a monster like me? I shall need a woman with a single head. Grant me the woman who has just entered your house, carrying a pot of water.'

Lord Shiva glanced away from Ravana. Shiva was guileless and true to his word, but how could he hand over his own wife?

Lord Shiva wondered how he could grant his own wife

Lord Shiva wondered how he could grant his own wife

Lord Shiva rose. He realized he had been trapped into making a promise—and yet he was true to his word. He went inside and came





out, leading Parvati by the hand. He handed over his own consort to Ravana.

Goddess Parvati, the chaste and devoted wife, the handmaiden of God, was obedient to her consort. She went with Ravana as soon as her husband issued his command. Ravana walked ahead, and Parvati followed him. Thus followed the chaste and virtuous wife.

Ravana walked ahead, and the chaste and virtuous wife followed him.

The city of Dwaraka, the Lord God, Lord Shiva, Sahadeva, Lord Krishna, the Creator, the Protector, thirty-six million Gods, eighteen million ministers, nine lakh spirits and all the rest of the Gods looked at this scene and began to laugh. They began to ridicule Lord Shiva.

‘Lord Shiva, have you lost your senses? Mountains shall perish but Ravana shall not. You gave him the support of two strong companions. Ahi and Mahi and then you gave him your wife. Lord Shiva, have you thought this over? Do you realize that *you* shall receive the blame for the sin of sending a heavenly woman to the mortal world?’ The Lord God, my teacher, began to ponder the matter. The Lord God and the thirty-six million deities pondered the matter.

Then Lord Krishna said, ‘You are all very powerful Gods. This is not a matter for jest. We must take some action. How can a chaste and devoted wife, a handmaiden of God, be sent to the world of mortals? If she enters Lanka, it will mean disaster for Heaven. Gods, do you realize that mountains shall perish, but Ravana shall not? Who can possibly kill Ravana and bring Parvati back?’

The Gods replied in unison, ‘You alone can take some action.’

Lord Krishna said, ‘Listen, I will go and take some action. Do not stir from your respective positions. You must neither rise nor move till I come back. I shall kick the ass of anyone who attempts to get up, or I shall skin him alive.’





Thus spoke my Lord Narayana

Thus spoke my Lord Narayana

Lord Krishna took off, running through narrow, winding trails and twisted pathways.

My Lord Krishna made his way through twisted pathways.

He took the same path that Ravana had taken but moved ahead of him, then took the shape of a tribal man and blocked the way. He transformed a huge rock into a buffalo and began to hit it with a stick.

‘Get up, get up quickly!’ Krishna said to the buffalo. ‘Lord Shiva has cheated me. I gave him a basketful of crabs and a pot of liquor, but in return he gave me a buffalo that can barely walk. Get up!’

He gave me a sick buffalo, O Brother.

Just then Ravana came on the scene.

‘God be with you, O Brother!’ Krishna said.

‘God be with you!’

‘O Brother, you are very handsome, like a king. Who are you?’

‘Me? Well, I am Ravana, King of Lanka.’

‘Bravo! Bravo! You have a very appropriate name. You are the king of Lanka. Look at my plight, O King—I have been cheated by Lord Shiva. He took from me a basketful of crabs and a pot of liquor, and gave me in exchange this dud of a buffalo. O Brother, you hold its tail and I’ll hold its head, and together we can attempt to lift it.’

Lord Krishna smiled to himself, knowing the two could not lift such a huge rock. But Ravana felt that with all the strength he possessed, it would not be a difficult task. Ravana took hold of the tail and Lord Krishna took hold of the head, and both of them struggled to lift the buffalo made of rock. They failed.

They were unable to lift the buffalo.

Ravana broke into a sweat, but was still unable to budge the buffalo made of rock.

Lord Krishna pointed towards Parvati and asked, ‘Who is she?’

‘She is my queen. Her name is Parvati. I asked Lord Shiva to give her to me.’





‘What did you say? Do you mean to say she is Lord Shiva’s Parvati? Has he actually handed her over to you?’

‘Yes. I had offered penance for twelve long years, so Lord Shiva was pleased with me and therefore offered me Parvati.’

‘Ravana, you have been cheated by Lord Shiva. He is the greatest cheat. He gave me this feeble buffalo in exchange for a basketful of crabs and a pot of liquor, and yet you claim that he has given you Parvati in lieu of your twelve-year penance. Take it from me, Ravana, this woman is not Parvati—she is a woman who fetches water in Lord Shiva’s household. She makes dung cakes. She is a maidservant who sweeps dirt. Ravana, you have been deceived.’

Thus spoke Lord Krishna: ‘Ravana, you have been deceived by Lord Shiva. He has lied to you, has offered you a woman who fetches water, makes dung cakes and sweeps dirt. The real Parvati still resides with Lord Shiva.’

‘So what should I do now?’

‘You may do as you like. I cannot possibly give you any advice. You may do as you wish.’

Ravana went back to Lord Shiva, muttering furiously. ‘If Lord Shiva has indeed deceived me, I shall not spare him.’

Thus King Ravana went back

Thus King Ravana went back

Ravana went back, taking Parvati with him. Lord Krishna took another path, and flew past Ravana to Mount Kailash.

Thus Lord Krishna went to Mount Kailash.

Lord Krishna went to Lord Shiva and said: ‘Lord Shiva, I have devised a plan to sow doubt in Ravana’s mind and make him return Parvati to you. Now let me carry out this deception.’ Lord Krishna then went to a pool, caught hold of a female frog floating in the water and transformed it into Parvati, adding a halo round her head. He sprinkled nectar on her and brought her to life.

Thus Lord Krishna created a false Parvati.

The lustre of the real Parvati paled before the lustre of the fake one. Her beauty was so dazzling that even with the halo around her





head, the real Parvati would have paled before her. The halo-bearing Parvati entered the abode of Lord Shiva, carrying water.

Lord Shiva was stunned by the sight of her. He was so captivated by her beauty that he made a mistake—he took the halo-bearing Parvati.

Thus my Lord Shiva took her, and he and the halo-bearing Parvati lay down on the same bed.

Just then Ravana came back with the real Parvati. ‘Lord Shiva,’ he said, ‘come out of your house. I am going to spit on you and you are going to lick it. You call yourself God; you are Lord Shiva. You are the chief amongst all Gods. But you are false of heart. You lied to me—you gave me a woman who does your household work, who fetches water and makes dung cakes. The real Parvati is lying on your bed.’

Thus spoke King Ravana.

Lord Shiva said, ‘Ravana, please forgive me. You may take this halo-bearing Parvati with you.’ Lord Shiva told the halo-bearing Parvati to rise from the bed, and sent her along with Ravana. He then took the real Parvati into his house.

Choked with emotion, Ravana laughed aloud. ‘It’s a good thing the tribal warned me, otherwise Lord Shiva would have cheated me. I would have gone home with a maidservant instead of the real Parvati.’

Lord Krishna ran back to the steps of Mount Kailash and stood blocking Ravana’s path.

‘God be with you, O Elder One,’ Krishna said.

‘God be with you.’

‘O Elder One, have you been to see Lord Shiva?’

‘Yes, I have. And what’s more, I have brought the real Parvati back with me.’

‘Yes, you have managed to return, and yet this buffalo still refuses to budge an inch, O Elder. Once, you said you had offered penance for twelve long months, in return for which you were given the throne of Lanka and its neighbouring regions. I would like to ask you something. May I? Ravana, you have been given the throne of





Lanka and its neighbouring regions this is incredible. The gods are extremely wily. You say your name is King Ravana, and you call yourself King of Lanka. But you should have asked for the throne of death. If you had asked for the throne of death, no one would have been able to kill you. You would even have come to know who is capable of killing you.'

'What should I do?'

'You may do as you wish. But my suggestion is that you go back.'

King Ravana thus went back.

Lord Krishna ran back to Mount Kailash and said to Lord Shiva, 'You have turned Ravana into a monster, but what about his death?'

What could God possibly do?

He asked Saydeva to take out his book and read from it. Saydeva examined all the three realms of Heaven, Earth and the Netherworld, he observed the region of Meru, all the eight places of Kashi (Benares), all the nine continents of the earth and the universe of ten worlds.

'Who could possibly kill Ravana?'

Thus spoke my Lord God.

He examined again the eight places of Kashi, the nine continents of the earth, the ten worlds of the universe and the whole creation but he could nor find any signs of the death of Ravana.

Then he turned his attention to the kingdom of Ayodhya. The king of Ayodhya had a son called Dasharatha, who had a wife named Kaikeyi. She would eventually give birth to Rama, seven times incarnate. The whole earth would tremble on that occasion, and the waters of the ocean would swirl around thrice. At that moment Ravana would get pricked by a thorn, and the pain of the thorn-prick would shoot all the way up to his head. Ravana would then be seized by malarial fever. Eventually, Rama would kill Ravana.

Saydeva read this prediction from his book. At that very moment Ravana arrived.

'God be with you, O Lord Shiva.'

'God be with you. Is something the matter?'

'O Elder One, you have once again made a fool of me. You are a great God—you have given me the throne of Lanka and its





neighbouring regions and all the seven oceans. Do you wish me to be content with merely the neighbouring regions?’

Thus spoke my King Ravana.

‘Oh Lord, I wish to possess the throne of Death.’

‘What did you say?’

The throne of death. What do you think?’

Lord Shiva took pen and paper and sat down to write.

Thus my Lord Shiva sat down to write about Ravana’s death.

The king of Ayodhya will have a queen named Kaikeyi. She would give birth to Rama, seven times incarnate. The whole earth will tremble on that occasion, and the waters of the ocean will swirl around thrice. At that moment Ravana would get pricked by a thorn, and the pain of the thorn-prick would shoot all the way up to his head. Ravana will then be seized by malarial fever. Eventually, Rama will kill Ravana. Ravana will meet his death at the hands of Rama.

Thus wrote my Lord Shiva.

Ravana said, ‘Oh Lord, I am quite satisfied with the throne of Lanka. I have no wish to possess the throne of death.’

‘Ravana, I have merely written down what you asked for. Only Rama can kill you. No one else will be able to do so, not even I.’

‘O Lord—then I shall kill Rama myself, is that right?’ Ravana began to think, ‘The tribal and the Lord God have tricked me.’ I will go back to the tribal and kill him.’ So Ravana, followed by the halo-bearing one, descended the seven steps of Mount Kailash.

Ravana made his way through narrow, winding trails and twisted pathways. He looked here and there but could no longer see the tribal, nor could he see the buffalo. The gods have tricked me,’ he thought. ‘What should I do next?’

He and the halo-bearing Parvati made their way towards Lanka. Eventually, they reached the river Ganga. It was afternoon, and Ravana was tired of walking. ‘My queen, it is afternoon,’ he said. ‘I am terribly tired. Let’s rest under the shade of this sandalwood tree; we’ll go ahead once we cool off.’





Thus King Ravana fell asleep

Thus King Ravana fell asleep

Ravana's eyelids began to droop heavily. The waters of the Ganga went rippling by, as a cool breeze blew over them. Ravana lay his head on the lap of the halo-bearing one as the female frogs in the river croaked merrily.

The halo-bearing one felt like bathing. She made a headrest out of her sari and rested Ravana's head on it, and then she jumped into the Ganga.

Thus the halo-bearing queen jumped into the Ganga.

The queen was thrilled to swim around in the river. Soon she forgot all about her human shape and began to swim around like a frog. She was enthralled.

When Ravana woke from his slumber, he realised that his head had been resting not on the queen's lap but on the headrest made from her sari. Ravana grew furious. Where had his queen disappeared? He looked here and there but could not see her.

He let out a roar. 'Queen!' The sound emerged from all ten of his mouths. The earth began to tremble. The queen, still swimming, was terrified. The foetus within her womb, barely two months old, slipped out and began to float on the water. The foetus was swept ahead on the Ganga's waters.

At once the queen lost all her lustre; the glow on her face dimmed. When she emerged from the water and came forward to face Ravana, she looked extremely agitated.

'O Queen, has someone said something to you? Has someone reprimanded you? Tell me, O queen, why have you lost your lustre?'

Thus spoke King Ravana.

'O husband, if you had not roared so, I would not have lost my lustre. We could have taken the seed of Lord Shiva to Lanka, and made a new beginning there. But there is no point worrying about it.'

Ravana and his halo-bearing queen continued on their way to





Lanka. When they arrived, they occupied the golden throne of Lanka as king and queen.

The halo-bearing queen's two-month-old foetus floated on down the Ganga. Time passed.

The kingdom of King Janaka was situated on one side of the Ganga; on the other side lay the kingdom of Jambumali. King Jambumali was a gardener who ruled a small kingdom.

King Jambumali was childless. His orchard was also barren—no fruits or flowers bloomed. Even the king's subjects had become barren. The king took a walk in his orchard every few days.

The floating foetus came to a halt by the orchard of Jambumali, and suddenly the whole atmosphere changed. The foetus matured, and grew into a baby girl. The minute the girl was born, the trees in the orchard were covered with fruits and flowers. The people nearby were overcome with joy at the sight.

The child began to wail. Her cry was so heart-rending that the breasts of a barren woman would have filled at the sound. The barren orchard blossomed with leaves and myriad fruits and flowers.

King Jambumali was asleep. While he slept, he dreamt that his orchard had blossomed—every branch was laden with fruits and flowers—Jambumali was overcome with joy, and began to laugh aloud. His aged queen woke when she heard him laughing, and said to him, 'Hey, old fellow, what's the matter with you? Why are you guffawing in the middle of the night? Have you seen a ghost or a spirit? Have you gone mad?'

'O old queen, you too should be overjoyed. Our orchard has blossomed—there is a little girl out there. Our barrenness has ended now.'

Thus spoke King Jambumali

Thus spoke King Jambumali

The old woman said to herself, 'My old man has gone mad—he





seems to be possessed by a spirit.’ She grew terribly agitated. She took a splinter of wood from their slough, heated it on a stove and branded the old man’s buttock with it.

King Jambumali was thus branded.

King Jambumali began to jump up and down.

The old lady branded the old man. The old man leapt high up into the air and fell down unconscious. The old lady now grew even more anxious. ‘My old man is dead,’ she thought. ‘What should I do now? I am old and helpless. How can I keep him in the house in the middle of the night? He will have to be removed to the cemetery.’

There was no rice in the house. She tied up a bundle of leftover rotis and placed it next to Jambumali; then she summoned four youths and asked them to carry the king to the cemetery. The four youths took King Jambumali to the cemetery.

A cool breeze was blowing across the river. The breeze soothed the branded part of Jambumali’s body, and he woke up. He noticed the bundle of rotis tied to his body and the funeral pyre around him. A realization dawned on him, and he sat up. He remembered his dream and began to walk towards his orchard to make sure his dream had indeed come true. Bravo! Bravo! The beans had sprouted, the pears had blossomed, the bananas had grown in bunches, the mango trees were covered with mangoes and the berry bushes were sprinkled with berries. Choked with emotion, Jambumali began to laugh.

The king then heard the wailing of a child. He followed the sound and saw a girl child lying in a furrow made by the plough in the ground. She had a glowing, golden face and golden hair. ‘O God!’ Jambumali thought. ‘Whose can this child be, this girl? Who could have abandoned her? Who will take her now?’ He picked up the newborn girl and took her home.

The old queen was still asleep. Jambumali called to her from outside: ‘Hey, queen! Old woman! It is I who has come.’

The old queen called back, ‘Hey, Jambumali, why do you appear in my dream? Please do not appear in my dream.’ The old queen still thought she was dreaming.





Jambumali opened the door, went in, whacked the behind of his old queen and shook her awake. 'O, old queen, you assumed I was dead. But I'm alive and kicking, and I've brought home this girl.'

Thus spoke King Jambumali.

Jambumali showed his queen the baby girl with a glowing, golden face and golden body. 'O queen, fate has brought us this child. We shall bring her up.'

Thus spoke King Jambumali.

'O, old queen, this girl is now ours.'

Jambumali and his queen decided to declare to the world that the girl child was theirs, but only after play-acting a bit.

The queen said, 'From now on you must fetch the water, clean the utensils and wash the clothes. If somebody questions you, you must reply that I have been confined during the last stages of pregnancy and am unable to carry out household work.'

Jambumali went to fetch some water. The girls began to ask, 'Where has the old queen gone? Why have you come to fetch water?'

'Girls, the old lady is confined during the last stages of pregnancy, so I have come to fetch water.'

Thus spoke King Jambumali

Thus spoke King Jambumali

A few days later Jambumali brought some old, dirty rags to be washed. The girls marvelled at the sight.

'O King, now you have begun to wash clothes.'

'Yes, girls. But the old lady is finally free—she has given birth to a beautiful baby girl. You must come to inquire after her.' The girls began to follow Jambumali. They could hear songs being sung inside the house, and when they went inside they saw the old lady singing songs and rocking a cradle. She sang:

I have made a hammock
 God has gifted me with a golden child
 I have made a hammock
 I have made a ring for her





She does not cry, though she is a growing child
I have made a hammock

All the girls stood listening to the queen's song. The old woman was deeply engrossed in singing. Bravo! Bravo! The old man and the old woman were blessed indeed with their golden girl child.

Day after day passed. The old lady said, 'What are we going to name her?'

Thus spoke Queen Jambumali

Thus spoke King Jambumali

Jambumali said, 'O Queen, look at our child. She has a glowing, golden face and golden hair. I found her in an orchard!'

So what was this girl like?

She was Sita.

Day after day passed by. Month after month passed by. Sita began to grow very fast. She learnt the words 'Mother' and 'Father'. She began to lisp. She began to toddle around.

One year passed

I made a hammock

Two years passed

I made a hammock

Three years passed

I made toys

Four years passed

I made a ring

Five years passed

I made a toy horse

I made a ring

I made a hammock

Sita turned six. On the sixth day of the festival of Gauri, the ritual to invoke Parvati, the sixty daughters of the kingdom of Jambumali gathered and went to the banks of the Panganga to make an offering. Three hundred sixty girls from the kingdom of King Janaka, across





the river, also came to make their offering.

The holy hour had come.

The sixty daughters of the kingdom of Jambumali and three hundred sixty daughters of the kingdom of Janaka gathered together on the banks of the river Panganga. There was a huge crowd of girls on the riverbank.

Sita said to the other girls, 'Come—let us play *tiparu*. Let us dance around and enjoy ourselves.'

Thus spoke Sita.

The sixty daughters of the kingdom of Jambumali and three hundred sixty daughters of the kingdom of Janaka began to play *tiparu*.

Thus played the daughters of the kingdom of Jambumali

Thus played the daughters of the kingdom of Janaka

Sita, the daughter of a god, began to dance in a zigzag way. She began to jump around in a zigzag way.

She threw the stone in a zigzag way

She threw the stone in a zigzag way.

My mother, the daughter of a God, threw the *tiparu* forcefully. The *tiparu* flew into the air and hit one of the girls from Janaka's kingdom on the forehead. A trickle of blood began to flow.

The blood began to flow, O brother

The blood began to flow, O brother

And a fight broke out between the girls of the kingdom of Jambumali and the girls of the kingdom of Janaka. A scuffle took place between sixty and three hundred sixty.

Sita left the sixty girls of the kingdom of Jambumali far behind and went ahead, alone, to fight the three hundred and sixty girls. Sita beat up the three hundred sixty girls and pulled their braids away. The three hundred sixty girls ran crying back towards the royal palace in the kingdom of Janaka.

In the royal court of King Janaka were seated village headmen,





patwas and other men—twelve thousand courtiers in all. All at once, three hundred sixty girls entered the court, crying, ‘O King, we have a serious complaint.’

‘Tell us, what is the matter?’ said the king.

‘O King, on the third day of the bright half of Vaisakha, we three hundred and sixty went to the Panganga with offerings. On the riverbank were sixty girls of the kingdom of Jambumali. One of the girls from the other group was throwing the tiparu in a zigzag way, and it hit one of our girls on the forehead. A fight broke out between us. One of the girls from the kingdom of Jambumali took us on single-handedly and drove us all away.’

Thus spoke the girls of the kingdom of Janaka.

King Janaka stood up. ‘If this is true, let us go to the kingdom of Jambumali and see for ourselves what kind of girl is this.’

The people of the kingdom made their way.

The king made his way.

The courtiers, the ministers of state and everyone in the kingdom of Janaka made their way towards the kingdom of Jambumali.

They reached the banks of the river Panganga and sent a message to King Jambumali asking him to come to the riverbank with the girls of his kingdom. Jambumali hid Sita in his house and came to the river with the rest of the girls.

King Janaka said, ‘Now, girls, please show me, which of the other girls hit you? Which girl played mischief?’

The girls observed, ‘O king, that girl is not amongst this lot.’

King Janaka said to King Jambumali, ‘O King, a certain girl is missing—the one who played mischief. Go and get her immediately or I shall behead you.’

Jambumali brought Sita out, since he had no choice. All the other girls cried at once, ‘O King, this is the girl who played mischief!’

Thus spoke the girls. ‘O king, this is the girl who had played mischief. She is the one who beat us.’

‘O king, whose daughter is this girl?’

‘O king, this girl is mine.’

‘O king, hand this girl over to me for upbringing or I shall behead





you.'

'O king, I am a poor man. Whatever I possess belongs to you. You can take our beloved Sita with you—I gift her away at this very moment.'

Thus spoke my King Jambumali.

King Janaka took Sita to Janakapura on his horse, with great pomp and ceremony.

Once she was settled, Sita began to call King Janaka and Queen Janaki her father and mother. Day after day passed by. Month after month passed by.

Oh gods, who can fathom God's deed? There was a kingdom called Ayodhya, ruled by a king named Dasharatha. King Dasharatha and Queen Kaikeyi lived happily together.

One day King Dasharatha decided to visit his sister, Queen Janaki. He took a bath, removed his old attire and put on fresh clothes. He put anklets on his feet, wore a new coat and placed the royal crown on his head. He took his huge bow and his two-and-a-half-ton, sword-like arrow and got ready to leave.

My King Dasharatha got ready

My King Dasharatha got up to leave

King Dasharatha made his way to Janakapura with his huge bow and his sword-like arrow in hand.

He made his way to Janakapura

He made his way to Janakapura

He made his way through forests and reached the outskirts of Ramajipura. He left palaces and royal entrances behind. As he made his way through the forests, he heard peacocks and other birds warbling. Finally, he reached the outskirts of Janakapura.

The drums of Janakapura began to beat, and King Janaka came to receive King Dasharatha.

King Janaka welcomed King Dasharatha

King Janaka welcomed King Dasharatha





Both kings entered the royal palace. King Dasharatha cooled off and sat down to take rest. Queen Janaki was very pleased, and said, 'My brother has come to meet me.' King Janaka ordered a variety of dishes. Queen Janaki made the meal herself, cooked in milk and ghee.

Golden plates were brought out, and silver seats were spread out. The guest was invited to take his meal.

Thus spoke my king and queen.

King Dasharatha worshipped his guru, and worshipped the idol of God. After completing the ritual of worship, he sat down to feast on the rich and sumptuous meal prepared for him with such alacrity.

My King Janaka had his meal

My King Dasharatha had his meal

Sita had gone out to play. All the children were playing with a wooden horse, crying, 'Whoa! Get up! Move!'

Sita said to herself, 'Let me play with a make-believe horse, too!'

She came into the house and looked around. She couldn't find what she was looking for, but then she caught sight of King Dasharatha's huge bow, hanging on the wall. She picked up the bow and began to play with the two-and-a-half-ton, sword-like arrow, crying, 'Whoa! Get up! Move!'

My Sita thus began to play with the make-believe horse. When King Dasharatha and King Janaka finished their hearty meal, they sat down for a rest, and Janaka made a *paan*. Dasharatha was about to pop the *paan* into his mouth when he glanced towards the wall—and noticed that his huge bow and two-and-a-half-ton, sword-like arrow were missing. His hand stopped midway to his mouth, holding the *paan*. He got up in a hurry.

My King Dasharatha got up. He got up in a hurry when he noticed that the bow and arrow were missing.

Dasharatha said to Janaka, 'Brother-in-law, I am the greatest and strongest warrior in the entire universe. Very few people own such a huge bow and the two-and-a-half-ton, sword-like arrow as I possess. Someone has stolen this rare bow and arrow from your house. Search





for it immediately, or I shall find it very hard to control my temper.'

Thus spoke my King Dasharatha.

My King Dasharatha got up.

My King Janaka was very upset. Who could have possibly taken such a heavy bow and arrow? He sent several people out to search, and sent word to all the people of Janakapura to gather at one spot. He made an announcement: 'Whoever has stolen my guest's huge bow and the two-and-a-half-ton, sword-like arrow from my house must return it, or everyone in my kingdom shall be beaten.'

My King Janaka thus made an announcement.

The people gathered together. No one knew anything about the matter.

'O king, we are poor people. What could we possibly do with a bow and arrow? Where would we keep such a huge bow and a two-and-a-half-ton, sword-like arrow?' But King Janaka did not believe his people; he began to thrash them with sticks. The people cried aloud.

The king beat his people. The people cried aloud.

The people fell at his feet, pleading fervently, but the king did not believe them. The people said, 'We are barely capable of holding such a bow! How could we possibly steal it?' But the king would not listen or believe them.

Just then Sita arrived, playing with her make-believe horse—'Whoa! Get up! Move!' The tiny Sita came galloping. She saw that a great many people had gathered, and that they were all crying because the king was beating them up. She was puzzled at the sight; she thought they were playing a game.

The make-believe horse kept galloping around. Sita tried to penetrate the crowd but could not do so. She called out to her father, 'Please let me into the midst of the crowd! I want to watch the game.'

'Sita, my child, this is no game. Somebody has stolen your maternal uncle's huge bow and two-and-a-half-ton, sword-like arrow. We are searching for it.'

'Father, where were this bow and arrow kept?'

'They were hanging on the wall in our palace.'





Sita brought out the bow from between her feet and held up the arrow. Pushing the people aside, she showed them to her father, 'Is this the bow you're looking for?' she said. 'I took this bow from our wall to craft a make-believe horse.' Thus spake my mother Sita.

King Janaka, King Dasharatha and the entire kingdom of Janaka stared speechlessly. The bow was one of a kind—there was no bow its equal in the entire universe, either on earth or in the netherworld or in the sky. Only a great and mighty warrior could possibly have lifted such a huge bow and a two-and-a-half-ton, sword-like arrow. For such a tiny girl to craft a make-believe horse out of it, and continue to play with it, was astounding.

King Dasharatha said, 'King Janaka, my brother-in-law, please forgive me. I am going to leave this huge bow and two-and-a-half-ton, sword-like arrow here, along with this paan. You must hold a *swayamvara* when Sita turns sixteen. You may give Sita's hand in marriage to whichever great warrior who can lift this huge bow and two-and-a-half-ton, sword-like arrow with his left toe. At that moment, you must boil a huge cauldron of oil and place a huge pillar in its midst, on which you must hang a revolving fish. That great warrior shall then climb on to the edge of the cauldron, pierce the revolving fish with the arrow and make the fish and arrow fall into the oil. Then he shall himself fall into the oil, take seven dips and chew a paan after emerging from the cauldron. He shall spit the juice of the paan out in the forest and burn the forest. Such a great warrior shall win the hand of Sita.'

Thus spoke my King Dasharatha.

King Dasharatha left the huge bow, the two-and-a-half-ton, sword-like arrow and the spicy paan behind in Janakapura, and returned to Ayodhya.

The soldiers of Janakapura guarded the huge bow and the two-and-a-half-ton, sword-like arrow. Day after day passed by. Night after night passed by. Sita grew up.

Documented by Dahyabhai Vadhu

Translated by Jenny Rathod



EPIC





❧ *Manteswamy*

❧ *Male Madeshwara*

There are several sub-genres of the epic in Indian literature. Some deal with the great deeds of a hero, others describe several lives of the same hero (mainly in the Bharthari tradition) and still others focus on one or a few episodes at great length. Almost without exception, the first two types belong to the oral tradition, and are memorized and rendered by members of nomadic or itinerant communities. Such epics abound both in tribal languages and in India's scheduled languages, and likewise their audience comes from both the tribes and the castes. They can therefore be aptly called 'folk epics'.

The selections here come from two folk epics of Karnataka: *Manteswamy* and *Male Madeshwara*. As the translator of the former points out, 'Madeswara has been the subject of many oral and written works in Kannada and Tamil. The first literary work in the conventional mould of an Indian epic is *Madeswara Sangathya*, by a poet called Gurusiddha, composed in Kannada in the year 1750.' The heroism in both epics is based more on spiritual power than on physical strength and valour. Both heroes seem to have existed, though we don't know exactly when, probably early in the second millennium. Both epics have been passed down orally and remain prominent in Karnataka's religious lore.

The excerpt from *Male Madeshwara* depicts the birth of the hero, while the one from *Manteswamy* relates the hero's success in converting an ironsmith to the Lingayata faith. Both epics run to





thousands of lines. The excerpts produced here give an idea of the narrative style. The original Kannada versions are meant to be sung, an effect impossible to render in translation, particularly in a blank-verse translation like the one used here for *Manteswamy*.

Bhasha



From *Manteswamy*

The Kalinga Cave Episode

My lord comes to Kunduru Hill,
Stands on Canopy Rock.
The Light of the World, Light of the Heavens,
Light of the Depths,
Elder of the Earth
Looks at Kalinga Cave.
Can't figure out if son Kempanna's inside;
Doesn't know if he's dead.
Left the child captive to snakes, captive to scorpions,
Left him to be tormented by killer scorpions.
Can't find him; what use calling out to a dead son?
The Elder of the Earth stands atop Kunduru Hill,
Gazes on Kalinga Cave.
Within is Kempanna,
Captive to snakes, captive to scorpions.
'I toss to the left—
the cobra torments me.
I turn to the right—
the python torments me.
God! I lie in the middle—
The killer scorpion torments me.
Can't bear this captivity.'

Master, this snake captivity,





This scorpion captivity
I can't bear, O Magician. (Siddayya)¹
The tender Kempanna
Lies in the cave, my child.

Every moment he contemplates
The feet of the Elder of the Earth;
He hugs the python
And loudly sobs. (Siddayya)

Master, Elder of the Earth,
Mantedalingappa
Has cursed him.
On his temples
Grow *matti* trees.
On the little one's forehead, son,
Grow *bhasumanga* trees.
In his two eyes
Wasps breed.
In his nose
Grow *muguthas* trees.
In his mouth, O God!
Grows an anthill.

On his shoulders
Grow *buruga* trees.
On his back
Grow *bilpatre* trees.
Under his arms
Bees build hives.
Huge bees, child;
Little bees.

1. Indicates a sung refrain.





Inside his heart's nest
 Cobras make children.
 In his navel, child,
 A pipal tree is born.
 In his palms
 Grow *angalinga* trees.
 On his feet
 Grow *padarakshi* trees.
 His plaits measure
 Seventy arms lengths;
 They spread all over the ground. (Siddayya)

His fingers and toes, all nails,
 Embrace the globe.

The nails, they say,
 Encircled the globe.
 A hundred and one scorpions
 Spit venom in each hair hollow.
 Snake venom gets into Kempachari;
 Kempachari's venom gets into the snakes.
 Inside Kalinga Cave lies the little Kempanna.

He embraces the python
 And lies quietly. (Siddayya)

This snake captivity,
 Scorpion captivity,
 The killer scorpion's torment,
 Cobra's torment—
 I can't bear them, master
 May Mantedalingappa's feet
 Manifest on my head. (Siddayya)





Don't know when the master's feet
Will appear, Kempanna thinks.
Hugging the python, he prays;
'I have no one but you.'

Forgets his mother,
Forgets his father.
Forgets his brothers.
My darling
Forgets his hut,
Cowshed, sheep,
Bullocks, buffaloes;
Renounces the twelve-lakh fortune
That awaits him in his house.

Ayya, Elder of the Earth,
You are my only hope, says he. (Siddayya)

Master, Elder of the Earth
Mantedalingappa
Light of heaven, Image of Purity,
Father, when do I behold your feet? (Siddayya)

The Elder of the Earth stands on Kunduru Hill,
Hears the wails of Kempachari.

My son lives
My son isn't dead
My son is alive
He's praying to my feet.

The son who's praying
I must call now, says he. (Siddayya)

The Elder of the Earth
Mantedalingappa





The Master of Magic
Says he will call
Son Kempachari. (Siddayya)

Son, what is it, my darling?
What is it, my son?
Little darling,
Little son,
Seven-year-old child,
Tender Kempanna—
I heard your words,
I heard your talk,
Got angry,
Pushed you into the cave,
If you were just your parents' son
You would surely not have survived. (Siddayya)

If you were just your parents' son, my darling
You wouldn't have survived twelve years.
My poor child, you've lived
Thinking of me. (Siddayya)

I brought you, a seven-year-old,
Born in your mother's womb,
Nursed and raised by her,
Only to lock you up in Kalinga Cave.
You were seven, then spent twelve years here;
Nineteen years have passed,
You've lived in captivity
With snakes and scorpions,
Yet you think of me,
Call me Elder of the Earth.
Child, you are indeed the son
Of the Elder of the Earth.





You will be god to these humans.
I'll make you god to the people of this world.
Will invite your father, mother, friends and relatives.

I'll give you happy rewards, says he.
Kempanna, come out of the dungeon—
Show me your face. (Siddayya)

Kempanna, I dragged you out
Of Basavachari's house and
Muddamma's hut.

Fooled you, befuddled you,
Abandoned you in the cave.
The charm and grace
Of a seven-year-old son
Fills my eyes.
Haven't set eyes on you
Since that day, little one.

Heed my words this moment—
Come out, says he. (Siddayya)

Child, if you become my son
I'll bestow on you
The world of humans
That I have acquired. I'll make you my successor,
Make the sun and moon your guards.
Make you the husband of goddesses. (Siddayya)

Not five, not ten,
Son, not a hundred,
Not just two hundred;
In this world of humans
I've acquired





A good seven hundred
Village goddesses.
I'll make you husband to all seven hundred.

In this world of humans
I'll make you Siddappaji—
I'll call you my son,
I'll make you guru
To the gods and humans of this world. (Siddayya)

Kempanna, do you hear me
Down there in the dungeon?
Do you heed me?
My happy words
Will never turn untrue.
I'll never fail you, son.
Come up from the dungeon,
Show me your face.

I have no parents,
No brother, no comfort of relatives,
No wife and children to bother me;
No pleasures of the family.
You have no parents, no relatives either—
I am alone, and so are you.
I rule over humans in this world;
Don't fail them, son.
I'll make you god of the human world
And go away to the netherworld.

I possess eight hundred million
Living creatures—
I'll make you lord of them all,
And disappear to the netherworld.





The world of humans I possess
Is all yours, child. (Siddayya)

I can't live without you, son,
Can't bear to live in this town without you.

Where can I find a little darling like you?
Where can I beget a son like you?
In which house can I beg for a son like you?
So saying, the Elder of the Earth
Sits on a flaming seat.

My lord climbs the Kunduru Hill,
Master of the World,
The Elder of the Earth climbs the hill
As the little one cursed by him
Lies on his stomach
Hugging a python
Inside Kalinga Cave,
Wondering when he'll see
The feet of the Elder of the Earth.

The Elder of the Earth
Stands atop Canopy Rock
And calls out to his son thus:

Darling, son of ironsmith,
One with a long life, come out. (Siddayya)

Son of the ironsmith,
Son of Basavachari,
Son of Muddamma,
Listen, my child,
Kempachari, Kempachari—
Get up and come out. (Siddayya)





Ayya, son Kempachari,
 Little Kempanna,
 Get up and come out—
 He calls out three times. (Siddayya)

Within Kempachari's tongue turns sweet
 Hugging the python, he hears
 The words of the Elder of the Earth
 What he says is this:
 Master of the world, I've forgotten them all
 And lain here in Kalinga Cave for twelve years,

Why take the names
 Of those bastards? (Siddayya)

Pray don't mention the names
 Of my father, my mother.
 Don't call me Kempachari—
 Do I need that wretched name any more? (Siddayya)

The name of little Kempanna
 Suited the seven-year-old.
 Who needs that name now,
 Says he, hugging the python.

The Elder of the Earth
 Speaks thus the second time—
 Sorry, I forget, my son.
 You won't come if I call you
 Son of Basavachari.
 You won't come, little one,
 If I call you son of Muddamma.
 You won't come, will you, dear son,
 If I call you Kempanna?





May the name your parents gave you
Cease in that dungeon this moment.
May the name of Kempachari
Perish this very day.
I'll call out right at least now—
So says the Elder of the Earth.

Talking parrot of my grove,
Come, dear one. (Siddayya)

O precious stone,
Come, dear one (Siddayya)

My gold medallion,
Come, dear one. (Siddayya)

Son of the Elder of the Earth,
Chieftain, my deep blue one,
Come, dear one. (Siddayya)

Siddappaji, Siddappaji,
Get up and come, says he. (Siddayya)

Thus calls out my lord three times.
Hearing his words,
The little one shakes himself up.
From where is my master calling out to me?
Having called out, where has he disappeared?

The moment he is called Siddappaji
He rolls left, rolls right.

Tears in his eyes
Flow like a stream. (Siddayya)

The wasps in his eyes





Drop into the dungeon.
He opens his eyes,
Looks left, looks right—
Hundreds of snakes and scorpions!

Plucks each one from his body,
Flings them away. (Siddayya)

He cleaves the python he is hugging—
Such is his fury!
He looks up for the sky. (Siddayya)

Kempanna looks to find the sky.
His eye falls on a huge boulder
That spreads across the opening.
He spies a needle's eye of sunlight
Somewhere among the stones;
This must be the way, he thinks.

In wrath he gives the boulder
A violent kick. (Siddayya)

The sound strikes my lord
Like thunder. (Siddayya)

Who is this now? says the Elder of the Earth.
I thought I was the mightiest
In this world of humans.

My son is mightier than I am,
Says he. (Siddayya)

The boulder Siddappa kicks breaks in two.
One portion drops at the cave's opening;
The other hurtles down,
Arrives at the door of the monastery





In Rajabappagowda Pura.

It spins round and round

Like a top. (Siddayya)

Sung by Mahadevaiah of Hinakallu (near Mysore)

Documented by Hi Chi Boralingaiah

Translated by S.R. Ramakrishna

Bhasha



From *Male Madeshwara*

The Birth and Childhood of Madeshwara

*Behold the grace of Madeva, rising on the hills;
Behold our Shiva.*

*One can face even the blazing flames for a while,
But, can any face your black tiger, O Mahadeva?*

|| *Behold our Shiva* ||¹

The Charmer of charmers, Madeshwara, 5
Ash-covered live coal, invincible on the earth,
My Father, Allama Prabhu of illimitable glory—
The way in which, in this mortal world,
He came to get the mime 'Madeva' is thus:
Brahma, Vishnu and Ishwara 10
Sat together (once) on Mount Kailash,
And they entered into a wager—the sages.

|| *Behold our Shiva* ||

The god Brahma and the god Vishnu said,
Look, Ishwara,
You are the creator of the whole world. 15
After Threta, Krita and Dwapara,
The Age of Kali is active now.
In the Age of Kali, Dharma is destroyed on the earth,
And Evil is on the rise.
None is there to offer incense, none to raise hands in respect; 20

1. Lines in normal type are spoken, while lines in italics are sung.





None is there to take the name of Shiva and pray.
*You should manifest another incarnation,
O Lord of the universe.*

|| Behold our Shiva ||

Having listened to the gods, Brahma and Vishnu,
then the Great Soul said:

O gods, Brahma and Vishnu, 25
If I have to incarnate myself on earth,
There is one greater than I
Whom I have to consult—
Saying thus, the Great Soul in Kailash
Sat in deep meditation—Parashiva. 30

|| Behold our Shiva ||

When the Great Soul in Kailash
Undertook deep meditation,
There arose a flame,
Which shook the whole of Kailash
And set everything on fire. 35
Then the sages, living in Kailash,
Those without eyes, and those without legs,
And those without hands, unable to bear the god's fire—
They came running to Him—those sages.

|| Behold our Shiva ||

O god, O Great Soul! 40
None of us can survive in Kailash.
Cease your meditation, said the sages.
Hear me, great sages,
I am asked to have, on earth,
An incarnation, in this Age of Kali. 45





Brahma and Vishnu beseech me thus.
 What incarnation shall I take on?—He asked.
 Then the sages said:
 O Great Soul, give up your meditation,
 And we will tell you about your incarnation. 50
 Then they made Him give up meditation,
 And said, O Great Soul,
 If you have to know the nature of your incarnation on the earth,
 Shake twice your matted plaits on the left and right,
 And shake all your locks once, all over the world, 55
 And you will perceive your incarnation.
 Hearing the words of the sages, then, the Great Soul
 Called upon Brahma and Vishnu to witness,
 Took hold of his matted plaits on the right
And shook them with all his force—
the Lord of the Universe. 60

|| Behold our Shiva ||

When the Great Soul shook his locks,
 There arose, in this mortal world, seven lingas.
 Look here, Brahma and Vishnu,
 I have created seven incarnations—He said.
 When they asked him what these were, He said: 65
 Pathaleshwara, Maruleshwara, Nandishwara,
 Guragunjishwara, Nanjudeshwara, Mallikarjuneshwara and
 Shaneshwara.

Show us the eighth, they asked.
 He caught hold of his locks on the left,
And shook his locks—the Lord of the Universe. 70

|| Behold our Shiva ||

As soon as He shook His locks on the left,
 There arose a huge linga,





Like a pillar from the earth to Kailash.
What's this incarnation?—they asked.
This is the incarnation of the demon; 75
This is Shravaneshwara—He said.

Then show us the ninth—they asked.
For his ninth incarnation, the Great Soul
Gathered his locks, as vast as the universe,
And shook them hard—the Lord of the Universe. 80
|| Behold our Shiva ||

When He shook his locks, saying
This was His ninth incarnation,
There came into being a linga—a ninth incarnation,
Which was visible to no one there.
It came to this mortal world 85
And sat in the hollow of a neem tree—
The neem tree opposite the house
Of Halagappa, a shepherd by caste,
Living in the village Bhimanakolli,
Of Magga Maralli Heggadedevanakote. 90
In the hollow of that neem tree
*He lay in the form of a small linga—
the Lord of the Universe.*
|| Behold our Shiva ||

O Great Soul, they asked,
Where is your ninth incarnation?
Then said the God of all gods: 95
Look, he is my ninth incarnation;
He has gone to the mortal world as the Charmer;
He will ameliorate the whole world.





He is the Charmer—He said.
 The linga which was created in the eighth incarnation, 100
 The demon Shravaneshwara, approaching Him,
 Asked, Why did you create me?
 Do good to the whole world—He said.
 If I have to do good to the whole world,
 You have to hand over the whole world to me—the demon said.
 105

Then, taking a big copper plate—
 The Great Soul took a big copper plate—
 Recorded the grant of the whole universe,
*And gave the demon the big copper plate—
 the Lord of the Universe.*

|| Behold our Shiva ||

Then Shravaneshwara 110
 Went to the southern part
 And built a big city there.
 All the gods and goddesses
 That were on the earth and all over the world,
 He put them all in his prison, 115
 And ruled over his kingdom, unchallenged.
 The Charmer of the ninth incarnation,
 Who was in the hollow of the neem tree,
 Thought: If I sit here, I can't save the world.
 First I have to get Halagappa to worship me, 120
 And then I have to go out to save the world.
 Then he entered the house of Halagappa,
 The house that had twelve pillars;
 And he went inside the house, the Charmer,
And manifested himself there as a golden anthill—the Charmer. 125

|| Behold our Shiva ||

When the golden anthill arose in the inner yard,





Halagappa and Muddamma, his wife, grew worried.
Master, this is the house that was built
By our great-great-grandfathers.
But at no time had such an omen been seen. 130
Get up my master;
Let's consult the astrologers—she said.
Then the husband and wife, taking betel leaves and some money,
Went everywhere in Maggamaralli and Bhimanakolli.
There was none whom they could consult. 135
They crossed the tank that lay at the village entrance,
Came to the village and sat, panting, in the front yard of a house.
There, the Charmer of charmers,
Wearing a torn, old dhoti,
Having the sacred thread across his chest, 140
And holding the almanac bundle in his hand,
Walked toward the front yard—the Charmer.

|| Behold our Shiva ||

They sat themselves down in the front yard,
This couple, sighing and panting.
Why are you, husband and wife, 145
Sitting here so tired?—asked he.
Look, O venerable Brahmin,
There is a bad omen in our house,
Which has never occurred since the time of our ancestors.
Consult the almanac and advise us—saying thus, 150
They took out betel leaves and areca nut, tied in their lap clothes,
And set them before him with three coins, and lighted camphor.
The Charmer of charmers, he opened his almanac,
Offered prayers, and addressed them thus:
You Halagappa and Muddamma, 155
You are honest people and your faith is staunch.





There is no bad omen in your home.
 The Charmer has come to you as your family deity.
 First, you should worship him,
And then, you should give up your home—
says the Charmer. 160
 || *Behold our Shiva* ||

Halagappa listened to the Charmer.
 He didn't know that he was the Charmer.
 He took him for a priest from Kashi
 And said: O venerable priest,
 I am ready to forsake my home. 165
 But no harm should come to my only son,
 And we should be blessed with prosperity.
 I will give you all kinds of wealth;
 Just give up your home—the Charmer said.
 However, that poor woman, Muddamma, 170
 Said—O venerable Brahmin,
 We will get workers to come with spades and shovels;
 With their help we will raze the golden anthill;
 Then we will plaster the floor and continue to live there.
 But we will not leave the house. 175
 O motherly woman, don't say this;
 Your family deity is there in the form of a small linga.
 You should first offer him
 Milk ablutions; you will prosper because of him.
Leave your house at once—says the Charmer. 180
 || *Behold our Shiva* ||

After hearing the priest's words,
 They came home, the husband and wife,
 Carried all the household things to the back of the house,
 And built there a small hut for themselves.
 The husband and wife henceforth 185





Got up together, early in the morning,
Took their bath, and, after milking their cow,
Poured the milk over the golden anthill
And worshipped it, first in the day.
Then the Charmer of charmers, 190
Who was inside in the form of a small linga,
Thought thus: for the first time since I left Kailash,
I have had milk ablutions. From now on,
I should ameliorate the world.
But first I should get a festival 195
From this Halagappa and then begin my onward journey—
With these thoughts, to Magga, Maralli and Bhimanakolli.
In all these three villages
He caused a great famine—the Charmer.

|| Behold our Shiva ||

It was such a famine that there were no rains, 200
And there were no crops—it was a terrible time.
The people of all three villages
Took out the seed-grains preserved for sowing,
And used them for food,
Till there was nothing left.
But Halagappa alone had one granary full of *ragi*. 205
After six months, there were again good rains.
Now, in dire need of grains for sowing,
The people of the three villages came running
To Halagappa and cried: Sir, give us four seers of *ragi*; 210
Give us five seers, give us ten;
We will sow the seeds and get good crops, thanks to you.
O villagers,
I will go to my Banagara red field, sow the seeds three feet deep,
And then I will return and give you the grains 215
So saying, he sent his son to the field with the plough





And, paying obeisance to the basketful of ragi,
And carrying water in a copper vessel,
Halagappa goes to the red field—Halagayya.

|| *Behold our Shiva* ||

Having reached the red field, 220

And laying the basket of sowing-seeds on the balk,
He told his son to set the oxen to the plough.

He stood his oxen facing east;

And from the west to the east,

He ploughed the field and sowed the seeds. 225

Who?—Halagappa.

Wherever he had stepped on the soil,

There arose small lingas on his footprints.

Halagappa turned to the west:

He saw a linga on each footprint. 230

O Charmer,

All the people are hungry in the village.

Whatever I sowed

You have turned into a linga—he said.

There the Charmer got a new name. 235

What was that name?

Linga in the temple, and

Linga around the temple.

O Madeva of the northern region,

You are born as Linga. 240

Laying down the basket of seeds on the eastern balk,

And having prostrated himself to the mother earth,

He said—My son, go on with your ploughing;

I will return to the field.

After I measure out ragi 245

To the villagers to sow—so saying,

Halagappa then came to the village,





And gave away ragi for all for sowing.
Then he returned to his field and finishing his own sowing.
Then the Charmer of charmers 250
Entered the dream of Halagappa,
And said: Look here, Gowda,
You are honest people, both husband and wife.
All of you of the three villages,
Magga, Maralli, and Bhimanakolli, 255
Come together once a year during Shivarathri,
And in the name of Bhimanakolli Madappa,
Organise a fair.
Saying thus, and after the fair in his name,
He departed from Bhimanakolli—Mahadeva. 260
|| *Behold our Shiva* ||

Leaving Bhimanakolli behind, when Mahadeva
Passed through four regions,
He, the Charmer of charmers, noticed
That in no region and in no town
Were there Maris and Masnis, 265
Durgis and Chamundis,
Or goddesses; in fact,
No gods or goddesses were anywhere to be seen.
Where were they imprisoned?
In which wood or forest were they lost?— 270
He wondered, and went everywhere looking for them keenly.

Then, in the southern region,
King Shravana, in Bankapuri,
Had thrown all the gods and goddesses into his prison
And forced them to do his chores. 275
There was the god Shani, son of the Sun and Chayadevi,
Whose face, directly, Brahma doesn't want to see.
Hence, Brahma has him lying





Face down beneath a cot,
 And on his back has placed 280
 The ledgers of accounts, with which Shani was busy.
 Narayana's task is to consult the stars;
 All the Maris and Masanis are set the task
 Of cleaning and drawing *rangoli*.
 Thus the noble Shravana 285
Ruled over his kingdom—Shravanayya ruled.
 || *Behold our Shiva* ||

The Charmer of charmers,
 With an ochre robe on his shoulders and
 a silken scarf on his face,
 A tiger's skin and a tiny hell round his waist,
 Jingling anklets round his legs, 290
 A rosary of Rudrakshi on his neck
 And a heavy brass bell in his right hand,
 Thus he reached the portals of Bankapuri.
 Hearing the jingling anklets near the fort-portals,
 All the gods and goddesses there 295
 Stood up and clapped their hands, saying:
 The Charmer from the north is here,
 The Charmer from the north is coming.
 King Shravana was sitting high on his throne.
 Who is he?—he asked Narayana and Brahmadeva. 300
 Who is coming here?
 It is the Charmer from the north—they replied.
 If he is the Charmer from the north, said the king,
 Invite him to my prison;
 Let us include him also there—he said. 305
 The Charmer of charmers came near.
 Who are you, child?—asked the king.
 I am the Charmer from the north—he answered.





If he is also a young saint from the north,
O Brahma, make a note of it in your diary, 310
And let him be with you in the prison—
Thus said the king to god Brahmadeva.
God Brahma took out his book
And held his quill in his right hand.
Wait, don't enter his name; 315
First inquire who his parents are—says Shravanayya.
|| Behold our Shiva ||

When the question about his parentage reached his ears,
The Charmer of charmers
Felt as if he had been struck by lightning.
If I have no parents, 320
If I have no gurus or elders,
I cannot possibly ameliorate the world.
First, I should get parents;
And only thereafter can I help the world.
Thinking thus, after hearing Shravana's words, 325
Like a flash of lightning during early monsoon,
He vanishes from there—the Charmer.
|| Behold our Shiva ||

Where did he go, having vanished?
He, the Charmer, got inside the clouds,
With an eastern cloud, he moved in the eastern region; 330
With a western cloud, he moved in the western region;
Making the north-south cloud his cradle,
He floated on the clouds.
Who are fit to be my parents in the mortal world?
Who are that honest? 335
Who have such unflinching faith?—
He wondered, floating in his cloud-cradle.
Then he saw Uttamapura,





Which lay next to Bankapuri.
 In that city, Uttamapura, 340
 There was a king
 By the name of Shankarapriya,
 Who was born through the blessings of the God of gods.
 There were also two women, Ramambike and Pathishile,
 Who were born through Parvathi's blessings. 345
 Shankarapriya had married both of them; and
 Lived in Uttamapura.
 But they were not blessed with children.
 Hence, he undertook austerities
 To please Shiva, the God of all gods. 350
 Owing to the intensity of the austerities,
 Shiva blessed the womb
 Of his second wife, Pathishile;
 And in due course a son was born to him.
 Since the son was born due to Shiva's blessings, 355
 He was named Shivadasa.

Thus he rules over his kingdom—O Lord of the Universe.

|| *Behold our Shiva* ||

When Shivadasa, the son, attained adulthood—
 There was one Uttrajamma, a virtuous young woman,
 Born of the blessings of Bhadrakali at Uttamapura. 360
 He conducted the marriage of Shivadasa with Uttrajamma,
 Made him his heir,
 And then both he and his wife passed away.
 Who?—Shankarapriya and Pathishile.
 This Uttrajamma 365
 Was a great devotee of Shiva.
 She would get up at dawn, worship her husband's feet,
 And then, after bathing in the river Ganga,
 She would offer prayers to her atma linga.





Later, carrying water in a brass vase, 370
She would worship lingas numbering one hundred and one.
The Uttrajamma couple did not sleep on the same cot.
She would beckon the seven-hooded black cobra,
And, making it her pillow, she would sleep—Uttrajamma.

|| *Behold our Shiva* ||

Thus the couple continued to worship Shiva. 375
Uttrajamma reached her fortieth year,
And still she had no children.
We are the devotees of Shiva,
And we have no heirs to our kingdom—worried thus,
They undertook austerities to please the God of gods. 380

Then the Great Soul
Assured her, in her dream, that He would grant her a boon.
Then they asked their spiritual guru,
Vyaghrananda Swami,
O Guru! We have been conducting austerities 385
To please the great God,
But he has not granted us the proper boon.
Could you, at least, bless us?

Vyaghrananda Swami replied thus:
Listen, Uttrajamma, 390
Suppose we grant you the boon of a son.
What will you give us in return?
Anything you ask for—she said.

Having accepted her words,
Vyaghrananda Swami said: 395
With the great god's blessing, I will grant you the boon of a son.
If you want to know who that son is,
It is the Charmer himself,
The Charmer of charmers.
The beautiful tank from which Uttrajamma, 400



|| *Behold our Shiva* ||

in the month of Karthika. 410

|| *Behold our Shiva* ||

|| *Behold our Shiva* ||





As a crimson lotus in the middle of the tank,
And as a small linga in the middle of that flower, 430
Looking like that Naga-linga flower you have seen,
He was floating.

Uttarajamma looked in that direction.

O Great Soul!

There is an unusual lotus flower in the tank. 435

Let me take it out

And perform the linga-worship—

Thinking thus, Uttarajamma stepped into the water.

The Charmer of charmers

Came near her, floating softly. 440

Gathering it with both of her hands

And keeping it in her tiny copper vase,

Lest it dry up in her sari folds,

She returned to her house—Uttarajamma.

|| Behold our Shiva ||

She kept the copper vase on the consecrated seat at home, 445

And the flower near it.

She performed the ablutions of one hundred and one lingas,

And applied *vibhuti* to them.

Then she took up the Naga-linga flower

And offered a petal each to all the lingas. 450

When she came to the core of the flower,

Unwilling to throw it away,

She kept it in her sandalwood box,

Along with the linga given her by her guru;

And she went to sleep.

By the time the morning dawned,

The tiny linga that was in her sandalwood box beside her

Was sleeping in the form of an infant boy—the Charmer.

|| Behold our Shiva ||





When the virtuous Uttrajamma 460
 Got up on her right side, what did she see?
 A tiny boy was crying loudly and continuously.
 Taken in by the boy's attractive features,
 She took him up and, placing him on her lap,
 Caressed him, and sang him many a lullaby. 465
 Because of the boy in her lap,
 She felt like a young mother,
 And her breasts became heavy with milk
 As if she were a young woman of fourteen years.
 The Charmer of charmers 470
 Was glancing at her with half-closed eyes.
 My dear son,
 Mahalingu, Shivalingu,
 Feed yourself on my breast milk—she said.
 But he held up both of his hands in protest. 475
 Who?—Mahalingu, the Charmer.
 O mother, don't suckle me
 On your breast; don't feed me milk;
 And don't kiss me and caress me.
 I have to grow very strong and subjugate Evil, 480
 Otherwise my words will not be life-giving,
 My utterances won't be truthful.
 But then, who will ease my breast pain?—she asked.
 Look here, Mother,
 Go to the hillock on the top of Nilgiri, 485
 And milk it down on that hard rock, near the Thavasare pillar.
 Let it flow in the form of the Shurnavathi river.
 Henceforth, let the small milk-pond become a huge lake.
 After I reach the Seven Hills,
 Whenever one hundred and one girls fetch water in pots 490
 And bathe me with it, during Deepavali,





I will deem it a 'milk ablution'
And will remember my mother—he said.
Then the mother,
In accordance with the advice of Shiva, 495
Continued her worship of Shiva.
She called this son
'Mahalingu' and 'Shivalingu'
But she desired that
The spiritual guru of her community, Vyaghrananda Swami,
500
Should formally give a name to her son.
Hence, she invited Vyaghrananda Swami—Uttrajamma.
|| *Behold our Shiva* ||

Documented by K. Keshavan Prasad
Translated by C.N. Ramachandran and L.N. Bhat



LEGEND





⌘ *Tejan Bal*

⌘ *The Tale of a Takalong
Cucumber*

⌘ *Chhura*

⌘ *Kaba and Baji*

It is difficult to say whether the heroes of tribal legends are historical figures or creations of the tribal imagination, but the clear associations between legendary figures and their geographical locations suggest a certain level of historical truth. The difference between tribal myths and legends is that, while a myth is performed within a sanctified space as a ritual, or part of a ritual, legends are simply expressions of parents' love for their children. Legends can be narrated by anyone, anywhere, in addition to being used in rituals by shamans and wise men. Because their value lies in the ability to instruct as well as entertain, they are full of valour and wisdom as well as sentiment.

The legends in this section are drawn from different parts of India. 'Tejan Bal' comes from the Pawri language, spoken by the community of Pawra Bhills in northwestern Maharashtra. The Pawra Bhills' language and value system indicate that they migrated from Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh or Gujarat some centuries ago, and their legends are correspondingly full of threats, mutual suspicions, battles and destruction. Political authority and survival of the family are of crucial importance.

The 'Takalong' legend from Khasi and the 'Chhura' (or Chhubura) legend from Mizo, both belong to larger story cycles. Their precise literary genre is the *raat kahini*, or 'fireside story'. These are collective memories of the supernatural; their metaphysics is based on the sedentary way of life, their politics on the perpetual need for self-defence. Their cultural importance lies in recounting how hunter-





gatherer communities came to be agricultural communities. Steeped in local colour and landscape, north eastern legends have an element of humour and irreverence, perhaps the most alluring substratum of any tribal culture.

‘Kaba and Baji’ belongs to a very different kind of culture. The Dhangars are pastoralists. They live by livestock farming and migrate continually through vast but demarcated regions, returning to their places of worship at fixed intervals. Extremely uncanny, they have a talent for minute observation and careful memorization. While they observe their own kind of rituals and have their own pantheon (only marginally shared with that of Hindus), they are not linguistically isolated. Many of their legends revolve round the traditional Dhangar aspiration to martial success and ability to see through strategem and treachery.



Tejan Bal

Dongarsing was a king. He had a beautiful wife, who one day became pregnant. Now there was no one to look after the house; and, of course, who would take care of the queen? So the king went from village to village looking for a maid. He went to a king. He had a daughter. Dongarsing asked him. He agreed. They thought it over for a day, and, within a few days Dongarsing went and fetched the girl, named Ganga Rani. On his way back home he thought, 'She is very beautiful—she looks like a queen. How can I make her work as a maid?' So he kept her in a room as queen, and found another woman to work as a maid.

The first queen gave birth to a boy, and he was named Tejan Bal. That same day the queen learnt that the king had another queen. Some years later the other queen also became pregnant, and she, too, bore a son. His name was Phulsing Raja.

One day when the elder son was thirteen and the younger one was five, the king brought them both some delicacies. The elder one ate them up at once; the younger one didn't get any at all. Ganga Rani saw this and thought, 'When Tejan Bal grows up, he will not share the throne with my son.' She cooked some rice and invited Tejan Bal for a meal.

When he arrived she beat him up, flung clothes and mattresses here and there, tore her own sari and generally behaved like a mad woman. She packed her bags and started for her parents' house. The king saw this and sent his men to retrieve her. She did not speak to them; she simply continued towards her parents' house, feigning madness.

When the king himself approached her, she said, 'Make me a promise—only then shall I speak.'





‘What will she ask for?’ he thought. ‘She will ask for gold and silver.’ He gave her his word.

Ganga Rani said, ‘Shoot Tejan Bal at once. He tried to grab me; he must not be seen again. And lock up his mother in the dungeon. Only then shall I stay; otherwise I shall leave.’ To pacify her, the king agreed. He ordered the sepoy: ‘Take Tejan Bal to the outskirts of the town and shoot him. Then scoop out his eyes and bring them to us.’

Shouting, ‘Let’s go hunting!’ the sepoy took Tejan Bal to the outskirts, seated him on a rock and asked him to look straight ahead. But they could not gather the courage to kill him. ‘What can we say, child? We have been sent here to kill you. The king has demanded that we shoot you and scoop out your eyes.’

‘In that case, kill me. If you don’t, the king will kill you. But first do me one favour: wait here while I go to my mother.’ Tejan Bal went to his mother and asked for three thousand rupees, then returned to the sepoy. ‘Consider this,’ he said, ‘I will not let the sin of killing me fall upon you. Take these three thousand rupees, and just sound a shot.’

The king’s men shot an owl, scooped out its eyes and brought them to the king. Tejan Bal’s mother was locked up in the king’s dungeon, and handed food and water from outside.

Tejan Bal went into the jungle and lived there for some years, sleeping under trees and eating the fruits of the tember and umber. One day the king and his men went into the jungle to hunt. The sepoy dispersed into the hillocks and spotted a deer. The king, with gun in hand, started chasing the deer on horseback. In the middle of his ride, he got thirsty and began to look for water. He entered the lush, green thicket of the jungle.

Tejan Bal was resting under a umber tree. As soon as the king saw him, the king was struck blind—he couldn’t see a thing around him. He sat suddenly still. But the child, seeing him in turn, grew frightened. ‘These people will surely kill me,’ he thought. He ran away.

The deer had slipped away, and the king’s men could not find





their master. Following his horse's hoofprints, the sepoy found the king sitting under the umber tree, blind. 'I saw a child,' he said. 'But just as I looked at him, I lost my eyesight.'

The sepoy gave him a drink of water and brought him home. In spite of all kinds of remedies, his eye sight could not be recovered. A sadhu who came to beg told the sepoy, 'Go get a Phulbakavali flower—only that can cure the eyes.'

The king announced to all his subjects, 'Whoever brings me a Phulbakavali flower will get half my kingdom plus great wealth.' Men started combing the jungle in search of the flower, but no one could find it. The four sons of Ganga Rani—Phulsing, Ramsing, Velsing and Raysing—also strived, all in vain.

Tejan stayed in the jungle for twelve or thirteen years. Then, one day, he entered a town where everyone was rich. Only in one corner of the town was there a modest hut. An old woman dwelled in the hut, and he went to see her. She gave him food, and he stayed with her.

The town had a fierce king, and the fierce king had a daughter. Her name was Mira Rani. The old woman was a servant of Mira Rani and the king. She brought home some good clothes from the palace, bathed the boy with hot water and gave the clothes to him to wear. Dressed up, he too looked like a king.

Every day the old woman made garlands for Mira Rani, but never showed them to the boy. One day he saw them, and he too started making a garland. He made a beautiful one in which he wove his own name—Tejan Bal. After her bath, Mira Rani took the garland and found it very beautiful. She asked the old woman, 'Who lives with you? Who made this garland?' The old woman, fearful, said, 'No one lives with me. I live alone.'

'Tell me the truth or I will behead you,' said Mira Rani.

So the old woman told her that she lived with a destitute boy. Back home, she abused Tejan Bal for his mischief, then brought him to Mira Rani. Mira Rani bathed him in hot water, gave him good clothes to wear and sent him back. Then Mira Rani wrote a note to her father, saying, 'I am now sixteen or seventeen. Please prepare to





marry me off.'

The king read the note, placed twelve quintals of iron on a table and declared, 'He who lifts this with a single hand and climbs a seven-storey *haveli* will win the hand of Mira Rani and half of my kingdom.' Sepoys were sent to distant lands to announce this. Kings and princes came from far and wide to make the attempt. They were told further, 'Those who will fail in this task will be imprisoned, and will then be released only after being branded.' People started to whisper. Some went forth, tried, failed and were punished. The four sons of Ganga Rani also came, but they also failed to lift the iron and were imprisoned for twelve years.

Finally, the boy who lived with the old woman was called. He resisted but the sepoys forced him to the palace. The king said, 'Lift this up. If you can't, you will be imprisoned for twelve years and then beheaded.'

'At home I escaped from heinous acts; here, too, death awaits me. O God, please help me,' prayed Tejan Bal. He bowed in all four directions, lifted the iron with one hand and climbed the seven-storey *haveli*. He won half the kingdom, and Mira Rani was given to him.

For several years he lived with his queen. Then, one day, he said, 'I want to go home. Will you come along?' The queen started weeping. Tejan Bal left town and walked away. Mira Rani stopped eating.

Tejan Bal crossed jungles and towns. At one point, he came upon a mighty man tying sand together with a rope. The boy tried to bypass him, but the man said, 'Hey, don't pass by like that. Only if you are as mighty as I am can you go ahead.' The boy stopped, tied some sand with the rope and moved on.

Then he met a valiant man who was busy peeling rocks. The boy tried to escape, but the man shouted, 'Hey, who are you? Only if you're valiant like me can you go on.' The boy stopped, peeled some rocks and moved on.

He walked further. Someone was standing in his path holding a bow made of palm tree. 'Hey, who are you?' the man said. 'Only if you are brave like me can you keep walking. Morning and evening





you must bow to me.' The boy bowed to him and moved on.

Now, along the way, he met a monster. 'I could get past the other troubles,' he thought, 'but this one is difficult.' He tried to pacify the monster by calling him Baba, Kaka and Mama, and the monster agreed that he could pass.

The boy asked, 'Where is my Mami?'

The monster replied, 'She has gone into the jungle. It's good that you are our nephew now, otherwise you would have been devoured today like a raw chilli. Come, sit on my shoulder.' He carried the boy to the town nearby. He snatched all the people from the town, threaded them together in a palm tree and brought them home. He took out a *mun* of rice, cooked *khichdi* of rice with the people and ate it all up. Then he brought the boy home.

The monster had a seven-storey haveli. In that haveli lived his young daughter Aagi Jibla—the One with a Tongue of Fire. The boy moved in and married Aagi Jibla. She would ignite a fire with her tongue and cook on it, and then they would eat together. He stayed there for a few days.

Apsara Phulwanti and her six friends used to visit Aagi Jibla for dancing and singing. Phulwanti smelled a human being. There is definitely a human being here,' she thought. 'Must be a god incarnate.'

'You carry on the dance,' she said to her friends. 'I need to defecate.' She went inside to spy. It was night-time, and Tejan Bal and Aagi Jibla were sleeping together. Phulwanti turned Tejan Bal into an ant by tapping on his head, then hid the ant in her hair and rejoined the other six apsaras in their singing and dancing. When it was time for them to go home, Apsara Phulwanti tapped Tejan Bal again and transformed him back into a young man. She seated him on a swing and gave him food in a nice bowl, and they enjoyed meals together. Then they slept together.

He lived there for a long time. One day, when the two were chatting, the topic of the Phulbakavali flower came up. 'This flower can cure blindness and lameness,' Apsara Phulwanti said. 'It grows in the Bijari Mala. I have not seen it, however.'

Tejan Bal said, 'I want to visit Bijari Mala.'





‘Don’t even mention the Phulbakavali flower—it can burn men, even gods, to ashes. Go first to my mother, Apsara Navasa, and get her to make you a promise. Don’t mention my name to her.’

He went to Apsara Navasa. ‘Aunt, there is a certain favour only you can grant me.’

‘What’s that?’

‘First, you must make me a promise.’

‘I promise. Name what you want. Gold? Silver? Everything is here.’

‘I want to visit Bijari.’

‘Do not venture there, or you’ll be burnt.’

‘Still, I wish to go there.’

Apsara Navasa called all the rats on the earth, gave them nuts to eat, and ordered them to dig a burrow into the first, second and third layers of earth. She seated Tejan Bal, the son-in-law, on the largest rat and took him to Bijari Mala through that burrow. All of them roamed in Bijari Mala.

Phulbakavali Rani, the queen of that flower, was enjoying her twelve-year sleep. The rats plucked the flower. Tejan Bal picked it up and put it in his pocket. Phulbakavali Rani’s ring bore her name. Tejan Bal took it off and slipped his own ring on to her finger. He had exchanged their rings.

He came back to Apsara Phulwanti and said, ‘You are my queen. I am going away—would you like to come?’

‘Yes, I’ll come.’

Kala Rana, the monster, came and gave him a stick with twelve joints. ‘If you’re ever in any kind of trouble, use this stick.’ He made them a palanquin. Tejan Bal and Phulwanti sat in the palanquin and went to Aagi Jibla. From there, the three of them went to Mira Rani. Rani had abstained from food for twelve years. Seeing Tejan back, she broke her fast, and she, too, joined the group.

The four of them travelled to Tejan Bal’s town. The four sons of Ganga Rani had been imprisoned for twelve years, and then released after being branded with hot iron. They were on the same path.





While travelling, Tejan Bal and his queens rested on a riverbank. Tejan said to them, 'I have no bidis. Wait here while I go and have a puff or two.' The four brothers were approaching. Tejan Bal went to them and they gave him a *bidi*. While they all smoked together, a blind man passed by. Tejan took the flower from his pocket and touched it to the blind man's eyes—and he regained his eyesight. Seeing this, the four brothers assaulted Tejan, beat him up and threw him in a *nallah*. They seized the flower and took it home.

Those queens were still waiting. Aagi Jibla turned into a kite, seated the others on her wings and flew away. They started looking for Tejan Bal from above and saw him lying dead in a *nallah*. Aagi Jibla turned back into a human and carried him out. They brought him back to life, sat him in the palanquin and finally landed at the outskirts of his father's town.

The four brothers brought the flower of Phulbakavali and cured the king's eyes. In the joy of recovery the king gave a feast to all his citizens. Tejan Bal went to this party, but the king's men served only the others; they ignored him completely. He came home hungry, and his queen prepared some food for him. The next day he went to the palace dressed like a king. This time, people gave way to him.

'This must be a king,' they said. They led him to a chair. The four brothers recognized him. 'Dada,' he said, 'where did you get this marvelous flower? Please tell me.'

'Who are you to ask this? Sit quietly or get out.'

'Please do not get angry. Kindly tell me where you got this flower—because it really belongs to me.' He started to argue.

Just then Queen Aagi Jibla showed up. This flower is our possession,' she said. 'I helped seize it. It's not something you can find on any street corner.' But she was sent away.

Queen Phulwanti then arrived, and said, 'This flower comes from Bijari Mala—my husband brought it back. It belongs to us.'

Mira Rani appeared and repeated, 'We brought this flower.' She then said, 'These four brothers were imprisoned for twelve years. They were branded with hot iron. They are robbers. They stole the flower from us on our way home.'





Tejan Bal ordered the sepoy's fired, handcuffed and attacked with boiling water.

The king was called, and was asked, 'What is the name of your first queen? What is the name of her son?'

'That queen never had a son,' the king lied.

Tejan called the sepoy's and asked, 'Did you shoot Tejan Bal?' They denied having done so. 'I am that child. And now, where is my mother?' She was in the dungeon, reduced to a skeleton. He ordered the queens to take Ganga Rani away on horseback and scoop out her eyes.

Tejan Bal and his queens stayed on in that town. They destroyed the whole jungle, and at night they chanted the mantra of the stick with twelve joints. They had a twelve-storey haveli built and a Bijari Mala created. In the morning, people were astonished. Tejan Bal had taken control of the town.

Phulbakavali Rani woke up from her twelve-year sleep and saw on her finger the ring bearing Tejan Bal's name. She called for her parrot and sent him to Apsara Navasa with the message. Apsara Navasa got angry. In her wrath she burnt all the trees, turned into a kite and took to the skies. 'Let me find my enemy!' she cried. 'I will burn him to ashes.' In the meantime she burnt the whole glittering field.

When she spotted Tejan Bal she said, 'Son-in-law, you committed too great a crime!' Queen Phulwanti appeared and said, 'Mother, please have some food at least, and then go.'

Apsara Navasa didn't listen; she just picked up Tejan Bal like a tiny chicken and took him to see Phulbakavali Rani.

Tejan Bal looked very handsome. She seated him on a swing and gave him food to eat. Then they slept together. 'Twelve years have passed; let us go and meet our daughter,' saying so, her parents came. As they came up the three-storey house, they saw her sleeping beside Tejan Bal. Virtuous she was; but now the virtue was lost. They picked up both of them and flung them afar. Phulbakavali fell in the jungle. Tejan was flung across the seas. Phulbakavali's sister asked her parents, 'Father, could you meet my sister?'





‘Yes, we met her. We have thrown her far off in the jungle.’ She went to look for her sister.

Tejan Bal couldn’t cross the seas. He sat and wept there. Nearby, a couple of eagles were talking amongst themselves, saying, ‘At night, big animals come here. They will devour him. What he should do is to make earthen pots and climb a tree with them. When the biggest animal arrives, he should float the pots in the sea. If they sink, the animal will sink too, and die. If they don’t sink, he will be able to walk on the sea. A fish will jump with its fins in the air, which happens once every twelve years, At that time, he should pluck off the fins, and only then will he survive.’

So Tejan Bal filled pots with twelve quintals of soil and climbed the tree. At night, all the animals came to drink from the sea, and finally the biggest animal came. Tejan Bal dropped the pots. The biggest animal died. Tejan started walking on the sea, and when the fish jumped out of the water, he plucked off its fins. Then he crossed the sea.

Phulbakavali’s sister was searching for them. She was sitting in a nallah eating her food when a monster saw her. ‘I can finally see a human being, after twenty-four years. But I need a woman for myself—I shall keep this one.’ The monster brought her home. She wailed, but he locked her up in a bungalow.

Tejan Bal was wandering. He climbed up a tree, looked around and saw the bungalow. Hungry, he thought, ‘I shall go there and beg for some food.’ When he arrived he saw a woman crying, and she said to him, ‘Dada, this is not a human being’s house. Go away quickly.’

‘But why are you crying?’

‘I am Phulbakavali’s sister. The monster has abducted me.’ Tejan Bal broke into the bungalow and brought her out.

They took to the path, but soon met the monster. Tejan Bal showed him the fins of the fish. But this couldn’t work. The monster had a parrot at his home, and the parrot had his soul. If the bird was killed, he would die. Tejan called all the parrots in the jungle, and they convinced this parrot to come into the jungle. The bird started





moving from one tree to another; and did not come down. Tejan took some nuts from his pocket, and then the bird came down.

Tejan and the monster then fought a battle through the parrot. Tejan took his sword and chopped off the parrot's leg; at that moment the monster lost his leg, too. He smashed the parrot's eyes, and at that moment the monster lost his eyes, too. He cut off the parrot's head, and at that moment the monster lost his head, too. Now the monster was dead. Tejan and Phulbakavali's sister started searching for Phulbakavali. When they found her, they saw that her father had chained her up with twelve quintals of iron. Seeing Tejan and her sister, she started crying. They broke the chain into pieces and freed her.

The sister went home, and at night Tejan Bal and Phulbakavali slept together. Her father watched them. 'He will never find out what I do,' her father thought. He threw Tejan out and left him in the jungle, then brought Phulbakavali to a temple and kept her there. Her sister grew worried about Tejan, thinking, 'He will be eaten by wild animals.' She searched for him and found him wandering in some fields. They sat and ate together under a banyan tree.

Eventually, he grew drowsy and fell asleep in her lap. A monster came and abducted her, then locked her up in a bungalow. Tejan Bal went in search of her, but when he found her she said, 'Do not come here; a monster lives here.' Some monkeys heard them, and the girl flew away on the fins of the fish. Tejan Bal was left alone. Some monkeys saw him, and they stood on one another's shoulders to climb the haveli and rescue him.

Wandering on, Tejan reached a village, where he stayed and begged for food. There was a new Devi temple in the village, and people visited daily for *darshana*. Tejan, too, went to the temple and bowed to the goddess. When it got dark, he lay down there. Suddenly, at midnight, Phulbakavali came out, saw him, and said, 'How my father has created hardships for you!'

He begged daily in the village and slept in the temple. The men in the village grew bewildered and stopped giving him food. One night he asked Phulbakavali, 'Should I sell your flower in the





market?’ The next day, with her permission, he went to the grocer. The grocer saw the flower and said, ‘I cannot afford such an expensive item. Take it to the king.’

Tejan went to the king, who looked at the flower and asked, ‘Where did you get this? You must be a thief! Lock him up in the dungeon.’ The flower was placed in front of the king. Suddenly the king found himself with a lot of wealth. So he gave away his two daughters and half of his kingdom to Tejan Bal.

Yet still Tejan went to the temple every night at midnight and took his meals there. The king’s daughters saw this and told the king. The king appointed sepoys to watch, and they saw Tejan eat with Phulbakavali. When the villagers heard, they gathered at the temple and demolished it.

At midnight, Tejan Bal again carried food to the temple. He found a seed in the food and sowed it on the site of the demolished temple. On the same piece of land, Kala Kunbi the farmer sowed rice. Rice grew there. At the time of the harvest, Kala Kunbi mistakenly harvested Tejan’s sapling along with the rice. Tejan went to the Kunbi and said, ‘You have harvested the seed I sowed—you will have children. If you have a daughter, she will belong to me.’

The farmer threshed the rice and celebrated the festival of Navai. His old wife ate the rice, became pregnant and delivered a girl. Tejan Bal paid all their expenses. The girl grew up without milk, and when she came of age Tejan took her, saying, ‘She is my queen.’

Phulbakavali, while staying at the temple, learnt dance and music. Singing, dancing and playing, she fended for herself. One day Tejan appeared, riding the fins of the fish, and took her away. Her parents saw this, and agreed to give her away in marriage. Tejan brought her home.

One day he received a message from a king, saying, ‘Get out of our path. My soldiers are coming this way—they will kill and finish you.’

Tejan sent a reply: ‘I am ready to fight single-handedly—send as many men as you have.’ The king’s soldiers came, but Kala Rana, the monster, also came and massacred all the soldiers. Then Aagi





Jibla appeared and burnt them all to ashes, and Kala Rana came and flooded the land. Thus that kingdom was destroyed.

So Tejan lived with all his seven queens—Mira Rani, Phulwanti Rani, Aagi Jibla Rani, Phulbakavali Rani, the two daughters of the king and the daughter of the farmer. Each of them bore him a son, and thus they all lived happily.

Documented by Subhash Pawra

Translated by Aruna Joshi

Bhasha



The Tale of a Takalong Cucumber

On their way to the fields, a group of young men and women saw a dense growth of cucumber leaves but no cucumber among them. When the leader of the group suggested they try to find one, Jop, the young nephew of the chief, found a single fruit. The next day they followed the same path, and again the leader suggested looking for a cucumber. Again Jop found one while the rest looked everywhere to no avail. The fruit was a beautiful yellow colour and emitted a sweet fragrance.

One of the boys remarked that Jop would be lucky if he found a woman so fair and sweet to be his wife. Jop, in youthful enthusiasm, said it was easy—he had only to search for one. This boastful answer irritated one jealous boy, whose response led to a bet—Jop would go out into the world, find such a woman, marry her and bring her back to the village. The village boys and girls would work for Jop's parents on his behalf during his absence. If Jop returned, empty-handed, he would have to pay his friends back for their labour and live in disgrace.

The bet was agreed to reluctantly by Jop's parents, who thought their son was headstrong and imprudent. Leaving home, he took with him the cucumber, some rice, some dry fish and a sword.

Jop's search led him to a hut in a large forest where an old woman dwelt. The old woman told him she knew what he was looking for and how to go about it, and said he would be successful only if he served her for two days. When he had done this, the old woman blessed him and sent him on his way.

Towards evening, he arrived at a hut where an old blind woman lived. Likewise, she told Jop that he would find the right woman only if he served her for three days. When he had done this, she told him that the woman he sought was the daughter of a fairy, and was





now being raised by an ogre. The daughter was the ransom demanded by the ogre for sparing the life of the fairy's husband, a human. Now the girl was known as the ogre's child, and called the ogre 'Father'. The ogre was invincible because he kept his soul inside two birds. Finally, the blind woman revealed that she was actually a hill fairy, and granted Jop a boon for invoking her name—he would be able to turn himself into a needle if the need arose.

Jop continued his search. After walking a long way, he came to a spring and took a drink of water. Overcome by fatigue, he fell asleep on a mound of grass nearby. The ogre's child, coming to fetch water from the spring, saw him, woke him up and asked who he was. Jop told her everything—all about the boys' bet and his intention to marry her and liberate her from the ogre's imprisonment.

In turn, the ogre's child told him of a dream in which her mother had told her that a man who bore a beautiful cucumber would marry her and liberate her from the ogre. The ogre's child then invited Jop to her house. This house was huge, and in the middle of its spacious courtyard stood a tall tree shorn of branches, with only a tuft of small branches at the top. On these branches sat numerous birds. While Jop and the ogre's child were sitting in the house, a big commotion could be heard outside. Eventually there was a roar, and Jop heard someone say, 'Akh! I smell a human!' The ogre's child implored Jop to turn into whatever he could, for the ogre was coming home. Jop turned into a needle in an instant, and the ogre's child tucked it into her pile of hair.

The ogre had come to eat. While he ate, his child asked him if he would eat up any man who came to ask for her hand. But he said nothing. Then the ogre's child went to her bedroom, took the needle out of her hair and turned Jop back to his human self. Leading him, the ogre's child showed Jop to the ogre, saying he was the man who wanted to marry her. The ogre was happy and immediately accepted Jop.

Two days after Jop married the ogre's child, the ogre asked Jop to accompany him on a deer hunt. When Jop found out that the ogre





was actually hunting humans, he declined. The ogre was furious. Back home, Jop told his wife everything and entreated her to find where the ogre kept his soul. The next evening, when the ogre was back, she gave him enormous draughts of liquor to drink, and when he was sufficiently inebriated she coaxed him into telling her where he kept his soul. Stupefied by drink, he told her that he kept it in a dove and a langbasa.

When Jop heard the secret the next day, he climbed up the bare tree in the courtyard and took the two birds down, and the couple fled. The ogre went home and collapsed, feeling sick. When he saw that his child and her husband were no longer there, and the birds were no longer flying around the tree, he was filled with rage, and went after the couple. While running for *their* lives, Jop wrung the neck of the dove and tore the bird to pieces. He did the same to the langbasa. The ogre, hot in pursuit, felt greatly weakened and died.

Freed, the couple made for Jop's village and arrived on the outskirts at nightfall. Jop suggested they spend the night there, as he wanted to announce his arrival with his wife. She pleaded that they should go on, but Jop's pride took over and he refused, wanting a grand entry. He suggested spending the night on a huge rock near a small lake.

The next morning, he went to the village and found his friends in a house where a feast was in progress. Greeting them, he asked them to come with him to the lake outside the village, as his wife was waiting there. His friends begged him to wait, since they were about to finish a pot of beer. Jop agreed. Preparations were made to water the highly fermented rice for beer, but there was no water left. It was decided that Prohshamar, the ugliest girl in the group, should go down to the lake to fetch water. Prohshamar was a very ugly girl who had come to the village with her father during Jop's absence. He was a medicine man.

Reaching the lake, the girl knelt to draw water and saw herself transformed into a beautiful girl. She returned to her friends and scolded them for calling her ugly. They sent her back, throwing insults after her, with Jop the most derisive of the lot. She went back enraged, especially at Jop, who was particularly insulting. This time she again saw herself in the lake's reflection—she was incredibly





beautiful. Hearing some movement above her, she looked up and saw a beautiful woman dressed in finery. She asked the woman who she was, and learnt that this was Jop's wife and Jop had come to the village to show his wife off to his friends. Now Prohshamar understood everything.

Back in the village, Prohshamar's delay disturbed her friends. They came to the lake to see what was happening, and also to have a look at Jop's wife. When they arrived, they saw a woman sitting on the rock, dressed in finery but horribly ugly. When Jop asked his wife about her transformation, she replied that the long wait in the sun had burnt her face black. Mystified, and accompanied by rebukes and insults from his friends, Jop was forced to take the ugly woman home to his parents and present her to them as his wife.

When Jop's old uncle, the village chief, died, Jop became the chief.¹ One day, word got around that a strange yellow flower had grown in the middle of the lake, and attempts to reach it had been thwarted by a huge monster. Rallying his men-at-arms, Jop launched a massive attack on the monster with red-hot javelins, and, after a great struggle, killed it. Jop swam across the lake and retrieved the flower. Prohshamar was suspicious of the flower and succeeded in having it thrown away near a place where an old woman lived.

The old woman went to work in the paddy fields. When she returned at dusk, she saw that her house was tidy, the floor had been swept and food had been cooked. The old woman was disturbed by this strange happening. She decided to lie in wait the next day to see who came to the house to do her chores. From her hiding place, the old woman saw a young woman step down from the hearth platform and start setting the house in order. The old woman came out of her hiding place and confronted this strange young woman who was sweeping the floor. The young woman told the old woman that she

1. In the matrilineal system of the Khasis, descent is traced through the mother, so children take their mother's clan name. Therefore children, their mother and their maternal uncle belong to the same clan. In the case of Jop's chieftainship, he succeeds his maternal uncle, not his father. Father and children might not belong to the same clan.





was the child of the ogre and wife of Jop the chief, and begged her not to divulge the secret of her identity. The old woman took pity on her and invited the ogre's child to stay with her.

One day, while the chief and his friends were playing a game of throwing giant creeper seeds, one of the seeds fell close to where a woman was working near the old woman's hut. She hid it by placing her foot on it. When Jop came to retrieve it, she kicked it to him without showing her face. Jop saw the smoothness of her legs and was reminded at once of his wife. That same night, Jop went to the old woman's house but could not see the young woman. On the fifth day of his daily visits, she finally came out. Jop was overjoyed to see that this was the ogre's child, his wife. There was a happy reunion. It emerged that Prohshamar had sweet-talked Jop's wife and then pushed her into the lake. She fell into the lake holding the cucumber Jop had given her, and was eventually saved by her fairy-mother. Her transformation into a flower and fruit were the doings of her mother. It was agreed that Jop would expel Prohshamar and take his rightful wife back at a later date.

Meanwhile Prohshamar, through spies, had come to know that the old woman was harbouring a beautiful girl and that Jop the chief was visiting her regularly. Prohshamar told her father, the medicine man, and on his advice she feigned sickness and called for Jop. The medicine man was also summoned, and after divination he proclaimed that evil had been done to Prohshamar, and that the healing rituals would require Jop to drink a potion. The potion was mixed so as to keep Jop in a state of mesmerization, and when the medicine man told him that the evil doer was a girl harboured by the old woman and that this girl must be sacrificed as atonement, Jop was stupefied. Jop's wife was dragged out of her hut by the people and given to the medicine man.

That night, the old woman ran to petition an agreeable elder of the village, who was also not happy with the decision to offer human sacrifice, as this was not dictated by law or custom. He met the other elders and discussed the matter.

Meanwhile, Jop fell sick, and this gave him an opportunity to go and stay with his parents. They had already divined the evil influence





that Prohshamar and her father were wielding on Jop.

On the spot where Jop's wife had been sacrificed and buried, a lake formed. This caused consternation, so the priests performed an official divination to look for signs and omens. A great gust of wind blew in after these rituals, and two birds alighted on the lakeshore. The birds began to talk amongst themselves about the ogre's child and everything that was going on. They spoke of the chief's illness, and said he would be well if he drank water from the lake. Jop was brought to this place and made to drink a little water, and indeed he got well. To the surprise and jubilation of all those assembled, Jop's wife then emerged from the lake. The chief's men-at-arms, livid with rage at Prohshamar and her father, went after them.

Father and daughter fled the village, with the men-at-arms hot in pursuit. They caught Prohshamar and the medicine man near a ford, and just as they were crossing it one of the men hurled a spear and killed Prohshamar. Her father, seeing this, suddenly transformed himself into a huge serpent and went after the men, but they stood their ground. A battle ensued, and the serpent was hacked to pieces.

The men went back to the village and razed to the ground the houses of the medicine man and the chief. A new house was built and there was great rejoicing, and Jop and his wife lived happily ever after.

Documented and translated by Desmond L. Kharmawphlang



Chhura

Chhura Loses His Way

Chhura and his family had become very poor. They had eaten all the produce of their fields and it was not yet time to gather that year's harvest. They pondered for a long time what they should do.

In their house was a very large earthen vessel, of which they were very proud. But now because they were so poor, they decided to sell their valuable vessel in order to buy rice.

The next morning, Chhura prepared to set off to the nearest village, one day's journey away, and try to sell the vessel there. Before he left, his wife warned him to be very careful with the vessel—she said he must not put it on the ground at all, for fear of breaking it, and that when he was tired of carrying it on one shoulder he should change it to the other.

Chhura set off very early, carrying the huge vessel on his right shoulder. His load was heavy, but since he had been so carefully warned not to risk breaking the pot, he did not dare to halt for a rest lest he be tempted to put the pot on the ground. So he walked on and on, and he grew very tired. When he had gone about halfway, his right shoulder began to ache very badly and he decided to make a change.

He remembered what his wife had told him—not to put the pot on the ground, but to move it to the other shoulder. He wondered how he could get it to the other side without putting it on the ground, and was very puzzled about the matter.

After thinking for some time, he turned himself around and thought, 'There! The pot is on the other side now.' He went on walking.





He did not realize that he was heading back to his own village. He went on travelling all afternoon, until the shadows grew very long. As the sun was setting he got back to his own village, thinking it was the place towards which he had set out in the morning.

His little children saw him and quickly called to him, 'Father! Father! How glad we are that you have come home!'

Chhura thought to himself, 'What nice, friendly little children in this village, calling me Father. I'm glad I've reached such a neighbourly place at the end of my long day's journey.' He did not realize they were his own children. He put up next door to his own house. The children told their mother, 'Father is next door trying to sell the vessel.'

Their mother replied, 'Go and ask him to come home.' The children did, but Chhura declined. When his wife came to the house to call him, he calmly replied, 'You think I am your husband, but I've got my own wife back in my own village. I cannot marry anyone else.'

Such a man of integrity was Chhura, a man always loyal to his wife.

Chhura the Male Nurse

One day, Chhura's wife went to the paddy field, leaving Chhura to look after the baby at home. Out of thirst and hunger, the baby cried all the time. Chhura could not stop the child from crying.

He took it in his lap and sometimes carried it on his back, moving forwards and backwards in an attempt to stop the baby from crying. He wondered why it cried so much, and searched for the reason.

Inspecting the baby, he came across a soft spot on the baby's head and concluded it was a large boil. In fact, it was the baby's fontanelle moving up and down slowly as it pulsed. 'Aha!' Chhura thought. 'No wonder my poor baby won't stop crying. It's this boil that is giving him so much pain.' He decided to remove what he thought was the pus in order to save the child from crying to death.

Chhura collected his instruments—a dao, a pair of kitchen tongs and a shallow plate—and began the operation of drilling a hole in





the fontanelle on the child's head. He removed the entire brain and consoled the child by telling it not to cry any more, for the operation would take all of its pain away.

No doubt this was indeed a successful operation, as the child stopped crying and then slept peacefully, or so he thought.

When the wife arrived home in the evening and enquired about the baby and whether he had fed it at noon, Chhura replied confidently, 'The baby had a large boil, which made it cry all the time. But since my operation it has slept and rested peacefully. I have put the child to bed.'

The wife rushed to the bed and examined the child. Alas! What had her husband done? What on earth had her husband done to the baby? She found the baby cold and dead. 'What have you done?' she cried. 'Its ears are all cold—it's dead! You'd better take it and bury it in the dead man's cave.'

On the way to the cave, the baby's body came loose from its wrapping and fell on the roadside. Chhura, oblivious to the baby's falling, put the empty bundle of coarse cloth in the cave and left, satisfied with a job well done.

On the way back, coming across the baby's body, he exclaimed indignantly, 'What careless, irresponsible creature would leave his dead child lying around unburied like this? Look at me—I took my dead child and gave it a decent burial in the cave.' So saying, he kicked the dead baby away, never realizing it was his very own baby that he had dropped on the ground.

As he went on his way, he touched his ears unconsciously. He now knew that the ears of the dead were cold, and he found that his own ears were very cold, too. So he said to himself, 'Oh no, I am dead—my ears are quite cold.' Without delay, he went back to the cave where the dead bodies were kept and stayed there for the whole day, thinking he was dead.

In the evening a bereaved, grand old woman came near the cave, and to relieve her loneliness she shouted to the dead bodies, 'O, you inhabitants of the cave! How was your time spent today?'

She did not expect any reply. But Chhura replied, in his flat,





hoarse voice, 'We spent our time here as we liked it.' His voice frightened the old woman so much that she ran home as fast as she could.

Knowing what had happened, Chhura immediately ran after her and asked her to wait for him. But this made the old woman run faster still, and even Chhura could not overtake her. Both the old woman and the man who thought he was dead ran all the way back to the village.

Chhura Takes a Flight in the Air

In those days, it is said, there lived a flying white horse in a certain corner of the mountain. Chhura and Nahaia heard about this strange creature and decided to catch it and domesticate it. They went to the forest and proceeded to the top of the hill.

There they found the very horse they were searching for, and approached it as silently as they could. It was ready to fly off. Fortunately, Chhura managed to catch hold of its leg while Naa held on to Chhura by his waist.

But the flying horse carried them up into the sky and flew them around the hill. After some time Chhura's hands began to ache and he grew very tired, as he was still carrying Naa on his waist. He asked Naa to take his place or to hold on to another leg of the flying horse. Naa protested, saying he could not change position in the sky, and asked Chhura to keep holding on. Since Naa had played tricks on him before, Chhura did not believe him, and asked him again to catch another leg of the horse. Naa repeated that it was impossible to make such a shift in mid-air. He asked Chhura to try his best for their safety.

Chhura grew very tired and very annoyed as Naa refused to change his hold. Finally, Chhura had no alternative but to let go of his hold on the horse's leg.

So both Chhura and Nahaia fell on a big stone under a bush, and some say they both died in this great fall.





Chhura and the Chengkek Fruit

In some kitchen garden there is a fruit tree that goes by the name of chengkek and bears beautiful red fruit. The outer covering of this fruit tastes very sour, whereas the pulp is juicy and sweet. This tree does not grow very tall, so it is not difficult for a person of normal height to pluck the fruit.

One day, Chhura was passing by this tree and grew very happy anticipating the taste of the beautiful fruit, which would be his after a short time. He went up to the tree and pulled down the branches laden with fruit. He could have easily plucked and eaten the fruit, but somehow he could not dissociate the idea of plucking the fruit from the idea of climbing the tree itself.

Now, as we all know, the trunk of the chengkek tree is too slender to bear the weight of a man. So Chhura dared not climb up the tree. Instead, he kept pulling down the branches but not plucking the fruit. While pulling the branches up and down, Chhura said to himself that if only his big brother Nahaia were there, he would so easily be able to tackle this baffling problem. So he never ate the fruit.

Chhura thought, 'If only Nahaia was here, how easily he would have solved this problem! But this fruit is not for me, not for me...I despair ...' So he never plucked the fruit, and he left the garden without eating it.

Nahaia Pretends Death

One day Nahaia decided that he must find out who his true friends and well-wishers were. He lay down on the Jhum-path, the margin of the farm, and pretended to be dead.

All the passersby saw him, but none bothered about him. They merely observed that Naa was dead and continued on their way.

Finally, Chhura came and saw Naa lying on the footpath. He was greatly aggrieved, and cried bitterly for the supposed death of his elder brother. He cancelled his plans at once and carried Naa home on his back.





When they arrived, Naa stood up and said calmly, 'Now I know that only my brother Chhura is my well-wisher and true friend. In times of need, he will sacrifice his time and strength.'

So from that time onwards, Naa treated his younger brother with love and compassion, and tried his level best not to repeat his deceitful acts.

Chhura's Travels to Mawngping

Long long ago, on one of his long travels, Chhura came to a village whose inhabitants were abnormal in that they never passed any excreta. When, therefore, the inhabitants in this village saw one morning Chhura answering the call of nature, they were greatly surprised and asked him what he was doing.

Chhura replied, 'When I was a baby, my mother made a small incision in my buttocks with a hot iron so that I could pass stool easily.'

Passing stool the way Chhura did was the desire of the people. The villagers thus requested Chhura to perform similar operations on their children. Chhura readily agreed. Instructing them that they should only open the incisions on the third day, he left the village after performing this dreadful operation on all its young children.

The villagers duly obeyed Chhura's instruction, but on the morning of the third day they found that all their children had died except one. The only survivor, who could hardly move his hands, was grabbed from every side by the mothers, and subsequently he died, too. The villagers were very angry with Chhura, and pursued him to take revenge.

Seeing them, Chhura hid inside a hollow log upon which his pursuers, on arrival, sat down to rest. They had given up hope of catching him and were about to return when one young man said that if the log were Chhura's head, he would break it into pieces without showing any mercy.

Hearing this, Chhura was frightened, and he shouted out from his hiding place, 'Please don't hurt me!' He was then dragged out and taken to the village.





Chhura then said, 'There are so many of you, and each of you want a hold on me. But you can't all have one, for want of room. Why don't you start holding me from my elbow? Then each of you can have a grip.' As they began to do this, Chhura broke loose and fled as fast as he could.

Another pursuit was inevitable, and the villagers were about to overtake him again when Chhura climbed up a big banyan tree. His pursuers waited under the tree. After a long time, the villagers got tired and decided to cut down the banyan tree.

When the tree was about to fall, Chhura called from the top, 'Now you must be very tired. Wait till I climb down and I'll help you cut down the tree.' So they waited, and Chhura came down. While the tree was being felled, he made his escape once again.

Chhura's enemies did not give up their intention to capture him. He evaded capture for a long time, but at last he was taken. The villagers bound him with ropes, put him inside a big basket and hung it under a bridge over a turbulent river.

Now Chhura had no more hope of escape, and had to resign himself to a slow death in his big basket. Fortunately for him, however, one day a Pawi traveller was passing along the bridge. Chhura shouted out to the man, 'Pawi-a, please come help me out of this predicament or I'll kill you with this knife.' The Pawi traveller grew afraid when Chhura showed a little bit of his half-cut steel instrument. He came and let Chhura out of the cage. Then Chhura said, 'Would you like to see how pleasant it is in that basket?'

The Pawi traveller sportingly assented, so Chhura put him inside the cage, suspended him over the bridge just as his enemies had and left him to die. He then climbed back up and cut the main string of the basket, so it fell, along with the Pawi traveller, into the turbulent river. The traveller did not utter another word.

Fortunately, that Pawi traveller had been a rich merchant. Chhura took all of his merchandise and returned to the village of his enemies, the men who had caught him and left him in the basket to die. The villagers were greatly surprised—they asked him how he had escaped in the first place, and how he had then come by all those valuable





goods.

Chhura replied, 'After you left me, I tied a cooking pot around my waist and dove into the water. I found the bottom full of wealth and collected the best of it. The riverbed is still full of valuable goods—go quickly and you, too, can be rich.'

All the men of the village proceeded to the river and did as Chhura advised. As a result, all of them perished. When they did not return and their wives enquired of him, Chhura told them that the wealth they had collected from the riverbed must be so heavy that they were delayed on the way. The wives went out to look for their husbands at once. As soon as they left the village, Chhura extinguished the fires in all their houses.

After a time the women returned, deeply grieved at the loss of their husbands. When they wanted to cook, they found that there was no fire in any of their houses, and they had to ask Chhura's assistance. Chhura sold them fire at various prices.

Thus Chhura made himself a very rich man. He later became king, and married the best among the widows and young girls of that village.

Chhura Loses His Crab Curry

Chhura is often represented as a man of immense strength and stature, blessed with an easygoing disposition but not much in the way of brains. One story tells how, on a visit to a friend, he was regaled with crab stew, which he had not tasted before and liked greatly. He inquired what animal it was made of, as he wanted to ask his wife to prepare the same dish.

On his way home he forgot the name of the dish itself, and began searching. Someone saw him looking about and asked what he had lost. 'Stupid,' replied Chhura. 'If I knew, would I be searching?' The passerby joined him in his search, though neither knew what he was searching for. After some time the passerby remarked that he distinctly smelt crab curry.

Chhura cried, 'That's it! That's what I was searching for, now I remember its name.' Knowing the name once again, he grew much





pleased and went on his way.

Chhura and Nahaia Exchange Houses

Chhura and Nahaia had houses in the same locality. Chhura's house was nicely built, but Nahaia's house was not properly completed.

After Naa experienced the problems of living in his own house, he came to Chhura and suggested that they exchange houses. Chhura replied, 'Oh no—your walls and roof are full of holes, whereas my house is intact.'

Naa readily said, 'I've made those holes so that I can observe the beautiful stars while sleeping.' In no time Chhura was tempted to observe the stars, and completely forgot the impending rain and hailstorms. So they exchanged houses as Naa suggested.

The first night was a bit cloudy, so Chhura could not see the stars he had expected. The weather the next night was not much better. Eventually, because of the rain, Chhura could not sleep properly, while Naa slept comfortably in his new house.

So Chhura had to work very hard to repair the holes right from the very second night of his stay in his new house. And he could not leave any holes for watching the beautiful stars.

Documented and translated by Laltluangliana Khiangte



Kaba and Baji

Kaba was the *mirdha* of his *wada*. The settlement was located at Dholdara. During those days, the Dhangars did not herd sheep; they herded cattle. Sheep were there only in small numbers. This is a story of those old days!

One time when Kaba, the *mirdha*, had numerous cattle, there was a drought. There was no water to drink and no fodder for the cattle. The situation was critical. Kaba took a decision—he appointed pairs of men, and instructed them to find water and fodder and to see if it had rained anywhere in the countryside.

The first pair of spotters was sent to Khandesh; the second pair was sent to Mandesh, the third pair was sent to the heart of Mughal territory; and the fourth pair was despatched to the Konkan Coast. Then the last pair was appointed. Kaba told them, ‘Go to the Phaltan area. See where you can find some water and fodder.’

The first pair came back from Khandesh. They had failed to find water or fodder. They were followed by the pair from Mandesh, who had met the same fate. They said, ‘There is no fodder available. The cows will break their legs unnecessarily.’ The pair that had gone to the Mughal territory now returned in despair, reporting another failure. The fourth pair to come back unlucky was from Konkan; they said there was no water and fodder there, either. All hope now rested on the pair that had gone to the Phaltan area. ‘Let us now see,’ said Kaba, ‘what the pair from Phaltan brings us.’

The fifth pair arrived in the area of Phaltan Gujar. The forest and fields of Asu Songaon were drenched with rainwater. The paddy and wheat flourished in the fields of Asu Songaon. The grass was green and abundant here. The pair’s joy knew no bounds—they picked up five loads of grass and hastened back to the *wada*.





Back in the wada, Kaba told his wife, 'Pema, the first four pairs met with utter failure, but the fifth pair is returning today and they look happy! They are coming from the Phaltan Gujari area. Welcome them!' Pemabai prepared an *arati* and welcomed them. As she was welcoming them, the arati flame blew out. This was a bad omen.

Pema asked, 'Where is this water and fodder? Why this bad omen today?'

'There is water and fodder and the grass is green and plenty!'

'Where?'

'The wheat is abundant and the fodder is green!'

'At which place?'

The frogs are croaking and the wells are overflowing!'

'But where is all this? In which area?' Pema grew impatient now.

'All this we found in Asu Songaon. Here we have five loads of grass from the same area.'

'But there has been a bad omen. Let's not go to that village!' Naturally, Pema was shaken by the bad omen.

'These women! The women and the ash of the kiln! Both are the same!' Kaba was now livid with her.

'But Kaba, we have had a bad omen! The arati cannot be performed.'

'It doesn't matter—I must take my cattle to Asu Songaon and get them water and fodder.' Kaba was now adamant.

The mirdha gave the word and the people of the wada moved towards Asu Songaon. They spent their first night in the region of Radicand. There was no moon that night, and the darkness engulfed the pastoral nomads and their camps. Kaba told the guards, 'Keep your eyes open for a tiger. I'll take a nap, and then you can sleep once I get up.' Kaba got up after a brief nap, and the night guards went off to sleep. A tiger came roaring through the night and started dragging off one of the cows. Kaba saw this and ran after the tiger. He held the tiger by the jaws and tore him apart. He then came back and slept serenely for the rest of the night.

The next morning Pema got up early. She wanted to collect fuel from the forest and finish her morning ablutions. She came out and





saw the fierce and massive animal sprawled on the ground. She ran back in terror and threw herself on to Kaba. Kaba was furious. 'Why did you do that? I have barely slept the night and now you have wrecked my sleep.'

Pema was still terrorstruck. She just mumbled, 'Tiger, tiger!'

'Yes, yes, I killed him last night and threw him there,' Kaba said.

'Now how would I know that?' Pema got up and finished her morning chores.

The cattle were now in pasture-land, and Kaba was happy. He chewed tobacco while the cattle grazed towards Asu Songaon. He followed them at his own pace. The pasture had turned green; the fields were lush with the standing crop of wheat and the green fodder. The cattle roamed freely in the standing crop and happily gorged away. Kaba's camp was now in the forest of Songaon. The next day, too, the cattle roamed the fields freely.

Baji Sonalkar was the village Patel. Baji was informed of an outside presence. 'Which enemy has entered my village?' he said. 'They have not left any grass or fodder for my village. All of our standing crop has been destroyed. I will meet them tomorrow.' Kaba's cattle were satiated and content. They now rested in the forest.

The next day Baji got up early. He had his bath, applied *tilak* to his forehead, girdled his sword and galloped towards the nomad camp. 'Ram, Ram!' he called.

'Oh! Ram Ram *Daji*.' Pema offered him lunch and Kaba offered his hospitality. After all, Baji was Kaba's brother-in-law.

'No, thanks,' Baji declined the food. 'This is not the lunch we should eat, *Daji*.' Baji had by now hatched a treacherous plan: he planned to eliminate Kaba. This way he would stand to gain a lot of wealth. '*Daji*, let us go and have some red vegetable.'

'But where will we get that vegetable?'

'Oh, come on *Daji*, we will go for a hunt and get it in the forest.' Baji was insistent. The brothers-in-law went for the hunt in the forest. Kaba walked while Baji rode his horse. They saw an entire flock of deer.

Kaba urged Baji, '*Daji*, don't waste this opportunity, hit them!'





‘Oh, Daji, these are poor deer. There’s no fun in killing them.’

Further on they confronted a wild boar. ‘Bhavji,’ said Kaba, ‘see!’

‘Oh, Daji, do we kill such animals, such poor souls? Why should we kill them, these poor animals? They’re not worth killing!’

‘Then, Daji, we are hunting for what?’

‘Come, I’ll show you. Let’s go a bit further!’ Ahead lay the tigers’ lair. The forest around them was so thick that even the passage of air was impeded. A massive, magnificent tiger lay in the lair—Baji knew all about it.

Baji said to Kaba, ‘Let us hunt in this thick undergrowth.’ But Kaba went inside the hideout. Baji had a sword in his hand, while Kaba had no weapons.

Baji thought, ‘Let Kaba go—what the hell do I have to do with it? The tiger will kill him, and I’ll be rid of him forever.’ Baji withdrew from the hideout and Kaba moved ahead.

Kaba was a man! He woke the tiger up. As the tiger pounced on Kaba, he took the animal by the jaws and killed him on the spot. Such was Kaba’s bravery! He came out of the hideout and said, ‘Oh, this bastard is running away like a whore! Daji, why are you running away instead of killing the tiger?’

‘Oh, one animal does not warrant two hunters. I was waiting nearby. Only one man should kill a tiger.’

Kaba, satisfied with this explanation, asked for some water to quench his thirst. Baji took him to the fresh waters of the river Nira. Kaba was now tired after the exertions of his tryst with the tiger; he flung himself into the water and dipped his mouth in the fresh waters of the river Nira. Baji had been waiting for this opportunity—he unsheathed his sword. Kaba saw the reflection of the sword in the water and thought, ‘My brother-in-law is playing a prank on me. Let him; I’ll quench my thirst.’ As Kaba bent down to drink, Baji dealt him a mighty blow and almost severed Kaba’s head. There Kaba lay, murdered by treachery. In his dying moments he cursed Baji, saying: ‘My wife is pregnant. If she delivers a daughter she will fetch water for your household, but if she delivers a son he will take revenge in front of the entire village assembly.’ Kaba then died.





Now Pemabai had no one to turn to but her brother. She had to stay dependent on her brother. She, as well as Baji's wife, was pregnant. Pema delivered a baby boy while Baji's wife had a daughter.

The boy started growing up. He remembered his father's vow of revenge—he outplayed every child in the village and made merry. Baji said to himself, 'This boy is a rascal. Every day there is some complaint against him.'

The boy grew up. He still vowed revenge. Baji said, 'Friends, kill the boy. Every day he is up to something. He lets loose his cattle in our fields and troubles all of us to no end.' The villagers gathered together and went to the son's wada.

Kaba's son was having his lunch of milk and rice. His mother, feeding him, started crying. The son asked her, 'Why are you crying?'

'My brother has set up the village to kill you. Eat this last meal in peace.'

'What do you mean?'

'See them! They have all turned up to kill you!'

'Why do they all want to kill me?'

'Baji murdered your father, and now he wants to do the same to you. So eat this meal at least!'

'Mother, don't worry. Let them come, I'll eat my meal later.'

He went outside and asked the crowd, 'Why the hell have you come here?'

'You bastard, we have come to eliminate you!'

'That's all?' Kaba's son took sword in hand and finished everyone off. Then he went to the village centre, where Baji Sonalkar was holding court, and shouted, 'Come out, you bastard! I, Kaba's son, have come to take revenge!' He dragged Baji out of the *chavdi* and cut him to pieces.

He then took Baji's severed head in his hands and went to his mother. 'Mother, see! Now sit on this head and take a bath; only then I will be satisfied that my revenge is complete.' Kaba's mother took the ritual bath, and Kaba's revenge was complete.

Documented and translated by Ajay Dandekar



LYRIC





- ⌘ *Garhwali Songs*
- ⌘ *Chhattisgarhi Songs*
- ⌘ *Saora Songs*
- ⌘ *Krud Ksing Songs*
- ⌘ *Garo Songs*
- ⌘ *Songs of Birth and Death*

Songs have a place of special importance in tribal imaginative transactions, as they relate to every aspect of life. These songs normally take the form of a requiem or a conversation, and thus might contain a lover's address to his beloved, a daughter's to her parents or a man's to his ancestors. The charm of tribal songs can easily be lost in translation. Their complexity lies in their allusive quality and their wonderfully earthy metaphors.

This section presents a sampling of tribal songs from about ten languages, some never published before. Tribal songs are sung during festivals, weddings and dance performances. When trying to interpret their meaning one cannot overlook the importance of articulation. If a man sings, while dancing, 'How dark my bed is now / Your body was a moon,' he is usually singing to a woman who is also present in the dance. In such a situation, the lines are pushed close to drama and the words close to parody, as when Indian film songs are sung for a thousandth time completely outside their original context. In a way, the purpose of a tribal song is to lend the expected conventional substance to a ritual. The singular first person in every song represents the impersonal past tradition of a community.

Many tribal languages have started using scripts, usually the respective state script. In these languages, a new form of literature has begun to emerge: written poetry. In a few cases, such as Santhali,





Mizo and Dehwali, the written, signed poem has already more or less overshadowed the oral tradition of songs. We have not reproduced 'written' poems here for want of good translations, but one should note in passing one of their main characteristics: the absence of fun and humour that mark tribal songs. The Khasi man who used to sing:

Why do you raise such an alarm?

Ben, that will give you a bad name

The shawl you have in your hands

Belongs to her mother, not her

is now forced by cultural threat and political marginalization to write the poetry of outcry.

Bhasha



Garhwali Songs

1

We offer flowers to you,
O doorstep of the house, be kind—
Fill the granary with corn.

It is the festival of flowers—
We offer flowers to you,
O threshold of the house!

May God bless you with an auspicious new year,
May your granary fill till it overflows,
May your crops thrive and wealth grow.
Let these seasons and months come again,
Let the flowers bloom again and again.

If we survive our times
the Phool Sankranti will return!

2

‘I tell you, Pandav Arjun,
I will not utter even your name!
I will become *doob* of meadows
and grace the high hills.’

‘I tell you, Draupadi,
I will also not utter your name;





I will be the bull of the cowshed
and will chew you with my teeth.'

'I tell you, Pandav Arjun,
I shall not utter your name.
I will be the lion of the hills
and kill you there in your cowshed.'

I tell you, Draupadi
I will not utter your name.
I will be a hunter
and kill you in the jungle.'

'I tell you, Pandav Arjun
I will not utter even your name.
I will be the black bee
and sit happily on the flowers.'

'I tell you, Draupadi,
I will not utter your name.
I will become the cloud demon
and kill you with my thunderbolt.'

3

'Where is my Chandra?
Tell me, *Samdhin*, where is my daughter Chandra?'

'Your Chandra went to fetch water.
She returned after cracking the brass pitcher.'

'I shall replace it with another one.
Tell me, Son-in-law, where is my Chandra?'

'Your Chandra went to gather grass.
She broke the sickle, threw it somewhere and returned home!'





'I shall give you a bigger sickle than that.
Tell me, Samdhin, where has my Chandra gone?'

'Your Chandra went to graze the cows.
She drove the cows into the gorge and came back.'

'I will give you a buffalo in lieu of cows.
Tell me, Son-in-law, where is my Chandra?'

'Your Chandra went to the fair.
She sold her bracelets and squandered the money!'

I will give you *hansali* in lieu of bracelets.
Tell me, Samdhin, where is my Chandra?'

Documented and translated by Govind Chatak



Chhattisgarhi Songs

1

The legs are made of gold
The bed is made of jewels
Though I have been tricked into your bed
Talk sweetly to your young love
All night I spent in tears
On your jewelled bed
With its legs of gold

2

The legs are of *saja*
The frame is of *sarai*
O girl with tinkling bells
I will make music
On your bed tonight

3

How dark my bed is now
Your body was a moon
Your eyes were antelopes
Long was your hair, my diamond
You loved me for two days
And went away to your own land
How dark my bed is now
The koel cries on the mango branch





In the forest calls the peacock
 On the river bank the crane
 And I mistake their music
 For the voice of my love
 How dark my bed is now

4

The moon rises
 Stealing the sun's light
 Between her thighs
 The man steals the nectar
 Between her thighs

5

You shook the mango branch
 You pulled it down and broke it off
 You have made me weep for love
 You cut a rope, you tied it to the branch
 You pulled it down and shook it to and fro
 A slender youth of Chiknimuhi village
 Is flirting with me in my house
 Come, let us go to the forest

6

The moon comes up
 Crowded by many stars
 If you do not desire me
 Do as you will
 But for love
 I will not go far away
 For love of you





7

In the flooded lands of Makri Amora
There are many clods of earth littering the fields
I am coming after supper; keep the door open
Sweet flower, do not deceive me, it would be a sin to do so.

Come come come come in. I will wash your feet with milk
I will sit before you, who are like a goldsmith's peg
I will sit by you, leaning against you.

To look at it, how beautiful! To the touch it is like a lotus
What do you call this fruit?
Give it to me, my darling, and I will be content.

In my garden are the fruits of palm and mango
In your garden is a tree of nuts
When they ripen and fall down
The little parrots cannot eat them.

You have the fruits of palm and mango
I have only the little nut tree
The heart of your fruit was eaten by my pet parrot
By Dassara all was over; there is nothing now.

8

I do not mind
Your habits
Or your morals
So long
As your tongue is sweet
And you look after me properly





9

Give me a little water from your well
I will clean my mind and say
O mind, be calm
But how can I explain a thing like that
To my body?

10

Girl, I will never leave you
Whatever is in store for us
We will share together
Mother Earth was born first
Then men were born
They drive nails in every boundary
You do not understand
Girl, I will never leave you

11

Girl, show me the way
To Semra, Bhadaura
Gudum and Deori
There are no trees
I can see no village
I have no one with me
Who will keep me company
Girl, show me the way

12

The moon is two days old
They are all playing in the house





Love, I could not find you even in a dream
And when I woke at midnight
I searched and could not find you

Documented and translated by Verrier Elwin

Bhasha



Saora Songs

1

My little son
Where have they hidden you?
My little son
Have they put you behind the grain bin?
Have they hidden you down in the wheat field?
Have they taken you to the forest
And covered you with leaves?
O where have they hidden you
My little son?

2

My father
Where have you flown away, my father?
Where will I see you again?
Whom will I call father now?
Who will care for your orphan boy and girl?
You have left us alone in Banbrinda
Where are you hiding?
Who will live in your house?
How suddenly you orphaned us
Where are you hiding
My father?





3

My little son, while you lived I was a queen
For you lay between my breasts
As on a royal throne
But now you are dead
I must lay you
In the hard ground

4

So long as my lord breathed
I lived upon the throne
But since he died
How worthless are my bangles
And the world is empty

5

O, they carry you away, and your soul will weep
The hammer says, Listen, O *Agaria*, do not make me
Tomorrow or the day after you will die
And then who will use me to strike the iron?
O, they will carry you away, and your soul will weep
The pick says, Listen, O *Agaria*, do not make me
Tomorrow or the day after you will die
And I shall be used to dig your grave
O, they will carry you away, and your soul will weep

6

The depths of sorrow in tears have not been measured;
The mountains and the hills will pass away.
Like flooded rivers and streams, tears may flow,





But what your destiny has given you must accept.
Brother, were I a tear-drop I would fall like flooded waters,
For the deep limits of sorrow's tears are not yet found.

7

She is very beautiful
But her young breasts are fallen
He fondles them no longer
That once were his loved playthings
Youth passes quickly, quickly
But a girl's youth endures
The shortest time of all

8

Take a golden comb
Bathe in shining water
Look at your body in the glass
The body is made of earth
It will be mingled with earth again
Were it made of bell metal
You could change it for another
Were it made of copper
You could change it for another
But no man can change
His earthen body

9

When they take the body from the village
The place is lonely
We give it company to the burial ground
The goose flies on alone





You gathered stones
And made a palace
People said, He has a house
But the house was not yours
The house was not mine
Our stay here is like a bird's flight

10

Keep your body well
There is great sadness for the body
The good man's body is taken in a chariot
The wicked man's body is dragged on the ground
Not even the vultures eat it
There is great sadness for the body

11

Where has your diamond-body gone?
As a child, games delighted you
You danced and played in the open air
Then you came in and ate what you desired
Childhood passed and youth came
Love filled your eyes
And carried away the memory of home
Youth passed and old age came
Your skin withered and you reaped
The fruit of youth

12

Ask no questions of your sadness
For that spoils your life
In your mind why do you ponder?





Why search through your memory?
Do not think, do not remember
Ask no questions of your sadness
For that ruins your life

Documented and translated by Verrier Elwin
and Shamrao Hivale

Bhasha



Krud Ksing Songs

The *krud ksing* songs are work songs, representing the agricultural calendar of certain Khasi communities living in the North Khasi Hills. Full of jibes and banter, and liberally lascivious in tone, they often focus on courtship.

1

Pound till the mortar is full, O mother
Half a maund of soy rice
When this is done, O mother
I shall go fetch that Toi's sister

Sweep the house quickly, O mother
Clean the front yard, too
Once the visit is made for real, mother
I'll choose Biha of the yellow heels

Go on, eat this piece, O Long
This mouth-filling *kwai*
Sure, I'll eat, O Biha
But Kili Lymphuid might get jealous

Eat, go on, eat, O Kili
This folded betel leaf so tasty
Sure, I'll eat, O Biha
But Long Mynsong will grow furious

Go bear the true words, O mother,





From us and from the out-villagers
For when I spit on the ground
It will fall on someone's forehead

Five men, five men, O mother,
Are not enough, says Biha
Only these five, O mother,
They'll last like the flickering of the light of a
Dried burning leaf

2

About your height, I have nothing to say
It is as God makes
It is your long whisker, O Sin,
That my mother dislikes in you

Kil's sister wears her hair in a bun
A bun like the nest of the wasp
But the whiskers of brother Sin
Are like the flower of the maize

What vegetables are boiling in the pot, O Kil,
A curry of brinjals?
No, I will not have any, says Sin
They stick to the whiskers of the wasp's nest

3

This year, this very year, says Ben,
A year of great scarcity
I'll make an herbal *pukra* from
the sap of *la pathuh*

Strengthen your luck, come,





Tall one, like the *la panew*,
Lest that brother, Edwin, with fat cheeks,
Beat you in the game

O Ben, why do you insult him?
Lhat Kro of the Langngi
Look at your own knees,
They have the grace of a cow's

Look, Pris and her sister are sweet
To the boys of Mathen
While Ben and his brother have
Hastened for pukra from U Jan

Why do you raise such an alarm?
Ben, that will give you a bad name
The shawl you have in your hands
Belongs to her mother, not her

Documented and translated by Desmond L. Kharmawphlang



Garó Songs

A Siroka

Concerning the clearing of *jamang*,
The cutting of stumps,
Profanation
And desecration
On this entire hill
And this cultivable land
May have stained
And may have stuck.
To the end of the flowering season of the coxcomb,
To the time of offering sacrifice with an egg
To heaven,
To the sky,
I will move and check,
I will comb the place—
Its profanation
And desecration
I am searching for
And sifting out.
Here I perform the sacrificial rite for this unsafe place;
I pour out rice beer in offering!
Pai profanation, away with you!





House Warming¹

Spirits, away with you,
I am celebrating.
As the father of Mune made the place his home,
As the father of Sane² cultivated the land,
I have a shield,
I have a shade,
I will also cultivate the land,
I will also dwell in the village.
Formerly, as my father with the *muni* of Niba,
In former days as my grandfather with the *chambuni* of Jonja,³
I will go out and play,
I will play with small round clods
For the land and the site of my house,
For my land and place
Of the bird,
Of the *sireng ruram*
By smearing the blood,
And by sticking the feathers.
I will also dwell in the village;
I will also cultivate the land.

Documented and translated by Caroline Marak

-
1. This song is taken from D. K. Sangma's *A Chik Golporang Bak* II, p. 45.
 2. Mune and Sane were two Garo matriarchs.
 3. Jonja was a Garo patriarch believed to have fought Salgra, the Sun God.



Songs of Birth and Death

A Munda Song

My mother, the sun rose
A son was born.
My mother, the moon rose
A daughter was born.

A son was born,
The cowshed was depleted;
A daughter was born,
The cowshed filled up.

A Santhali Song

If it is a daughter, she will at least put out a
bucket of water
To wash your tired feet.
If a son, he will perform all the funerary rites
And carry the bones to Damodar.

A Kondh Song

This we offer to you.
We can,
Because we are still alive;
If not,
How could we offer at all,
And what?





We give a small baby fowl.
Take this and go away
Whichever way you came.
Go back, return.
Don't inflict pain on us
After your departure.

A Ho Song

Where do you roam, dear ancestor,
The long day and the endless night,
The high noon on the rocks,
The rainy months in the forest?

Come back today and receive
Our meagre offering:
A piece of meat, a morsel of rice,
And a cup of rice-beer.
Witness our rejoicings,
Witness the ancient event,
The celebration and the joy.

A Bonda Song

My little girl,
Where did they hide you?
In which sky,
under which earth,
at the root of which tree?

Now the spring is here,
the mahul trees are
bursting with flowers.
Where have they hidden you,
my sweet little thing?





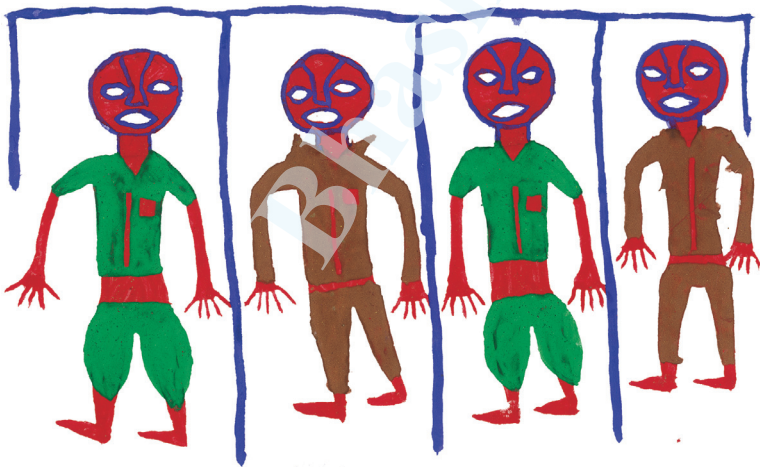
Did they hide you
in the deep forest
and cover you
with fallen leaves?
Did some evil god
eat you up?
Where are you,
my little girl?
Spring is here
once more.

Translated by Sitakant Mahapatra

Bhasha



AUTOBIOGRAPHY





⌘ ***Koletyache Por***

by Kishore Kale

⌘ ***Upara***

by Laxman Mane

⌘ ***Tanda***

by Atmaram Rathod

⌘ ***Uchalya***

by Laxman Gaikwad

During the colonial period, those who did not conform to the sedentary lifestyle and values of the British rulers became suspect in the eyes of the rulers. Nomads who had been integral to rural Indian society for centuries came to be seen as lazy, unproductive, outright criminal elements. Itinerant entertainers, mendicants and the disbanded soldiers of defeated princes were also branded as troublemakers. Community by community, these people were brought under separate laws beginning with the Criminal Tribes Act of 1871. Herded into segregated settlement areas, they were then prescribed ‘reformatory’ activities including forced labour. Over time, they came to be seen as criminals by society at large. In 1952, all such communities were denotified by the Indian government. They now carry the official label ‘Denotified and Nomadic Communities’. They are still hounded wherever they try to settle down, and in many cases become victims of criminalization and police atrocities. The autobiographical excerpts in this section are by four eminent writers from denotified communities. Kishore Kale belongs to the Kolhati community and Laxman Mane to the Kaikadi community, both of which are traditionally, communities of entertainers. Laxman Gaikwad belongs to the Bhamta community and Atmaram Rathod





to the Banjara community, both of which are traditionally mercantile. The works appeared first in Marathi. It was Laxman Mane's *Upara* and Gaikwad's *Uchalya* that first drew both academic and general attention in Maharashtra to the plight of the denotified and nomadic tribes; but reading this kind of writing as mere protest literature does injustice to its literary merits. The linguistic freshness of these works is so overpowering that they were recognized as contemporary classics soon after their publication.

All four writers have been activists and leaders of their communities. Their writing shows that literature and language movements remain the most potent weapons of social change.

Bhasha



From *Koletyache Por*, by Kishore Shantabai Kale

Against All Odds

The little free time I had in my childhood was spent playing with girls. There were a lot of girls in our neighbourhood and they were all my friends. I used to play *langdi*, *jivla*, and many other games. One of our favourite games was a make-believe wedding. Once I dressed up as a bride in a white cotton sari with coloured threads as the *mundavali*. Someone had brought *haldi* to sprinkle on the bride and the groom, an auspicious rite. Even vermilion and snow were put on my face. The make-believe groom was dressed in tattered pieces of cloth, representing a shawl. We were playing in our farmyard, away from the house. There was nobody there that day except us kids—Chhaya, Sanjay, Vinayak and some others—about a dozen of us. We picked some beans from the plants in the garden and pretended to cook a meal. Someone had smuggled some *bhakri* out of their house and we ate that with great enjoyment. Then we added realism to the whole thing by filing in a procession like a *baraat*. A few *ghungroos* were tied to my feet, and when Vithya started beating a rhythm on an empty box, I began to dance with all the others. What a racket we created! There was shouting, singing and the raucous rhythm of the tin box. And in the midst of it all, I danced with abandon and all the girls danced with me. None of us heard Aji come into the garden, so her voice made us jump out of our skins.

‘Kisrya, why weren’t you born a girl, damn you?’

The tin drum was suddenly and abruptly silenced, the singing and dancing stopped and all the kids took off at a run. Aji caught me. She was furious. She picked up her stick and it landed hard on my shoulders. She gave me a few sharp blows before I managed to free





myself and run off at great speed to Mana Aji's house. I stayed there all day until Aji came at night and enticed me home with sweet words. But as soon as I reached home, Popat Mama beat me till I was sore all over. Ajoba said, 'If I see you dancing or playing with girls again, I'll kill you.' None of this, however, prevented me from playing with girls again. It was one habit that just could not be beaten out of me.

My load of household chores increased with each passing day. Final exams for class five were around the corner and I had very little time to study. I had chores in the house, on the farm and in the fields, and I had to attend school. What time remained after the chores was used for studies. Sundays were school holidays, but I had to take the cattle out to graze. Sometimes I had to miss school so I could look after the cattle. I thought I could study while the cattle grazed, but what often happened was that I got engrossed in my books and the cows and buffaloes wandered off and destroyed the crops of a neighbouring field. That meant a scolding and a beating for me. The other herdsmen made fun of me and often forced me to go after their cattle, which they had carelessly allowed to wander far off.

Harvesting time and my final examinations came at the same time. My chores increased and I was forced to give them priority over my studies. Soon, however, exams ended and the summer holidays started. I wondered what I could do during the holidays. I wanted to visit Bai at Sonepeth, of course; she was in my thoughts all the time. But Bai did not want me there. Ultimately, Rambha Maushi took me to the *jalsa* party at Barshi. Because of the harvest Jiji could not go with her. I went very reluctantly. At Nerla, my chores were defined and organized, but at the *jalsa* party I had to run errands not only for the women, but also for the men who visited the women, I was kept on my feet all the time doing all kinds of things.

'Kisrya, hook up my blouse for me.'

'Kisrya, get the flowers for my hair.'

'Kisrya, have you got my sari pressed?'

'Kisrya, have you collected the money from that man?'

'Ay, you monkey, the tea hasn't come yet. Just go and see, and





bring it with you.'

'Kisrya, have you washed the clothes? If not, I'll be in trouble.'

It never ended. People were rude and insulting to me, since a young Kolhati boy obviously could not command any respect from the kind of people who came there. I was a delicate-looking boy, and some of the men kissed me. The monotony of the song and dance routine every single evening was terribly boring. And most of all, the sadness and despair of the women behind their laughing facades affected me deeply and made me very depressed. For the women and for me, life seemed to hold no hope of happiness. In fact, their lives were sunk in a deeper darkness than mine.

It was midnight, and a special session was being held in one of the rooms. The Chitra-Gulzar party was performing at the session. There were five or six spectators. The girls were dancing and singing; the men were drinking and watching. As the time passed, one of them began beating the rhythm on his glass, one or two threw money at the girls and one of them got up to dance with them. I was standing on one side watching the show. I was tired, very sleepy. But I had to stay awake, because sooner or later one of the men would want something or the other. At the moment they were high on alcohol, women and money. But soon they ran out of liquor. It was 3 a.m. when one of them got up, came towards me and said, 'Come on, boy, come with me.'

We went in a car to the market. I enjoyed the ride. The shops were all closed, but one shopkeeper heard the car and opened his door a few inches. He handed over some bottles of alcohol and we went back to the theatre. The *baithak* went on past 5 o'clock in the morning. The men continued drinking. Some of them passed out where they sat. The dancers kept dancing and I rocked on my feet with sleep. Finally, all of them either dozed off or passed out, and the dancers thankfully went off to change and sleep. I collected all the empty bottles and glasses and piled them in a corner. The men were oblivious to everything. Most of them wore gold chains with pendants round their neck and rings on their fingers. Their pockets were bulging with cash. One of them was asleep on a piece of paper on which *chivda* had been kept. I left the room, went off into the main theatre





and thankfully went to sleep.

I woke up at nine o'clock that morning, had a bath and carried hot water for the women to bathe in. There were two servants at the theatre, but one had gone off on an errand to the market and the other was ill. Since it was a Tuesday, the day of the goddess, some of the women, including Rambha *Maushi*, bathed early and went to the temple.

After a while I heard the men getting up. I braced myself for the calls of 'Hey, boy, get me tea, get me water, find my chappals...' that invariably followed as they came to consciousness. But there was a loud shout instead.

'Where is my locket?'

There was panic. The loss of gold jewellery from the body of a spectator was taken very seriously. The theatre owner was summoned. Most of the men suspected me because I had been in the room all night and was the last to leave. I broke down in fear and cried, 'Sahib, I have not taken your locket!' I touched their feet.

Someone said, 'Call the police,' but another said, 'Arre, why are you accusing this child? He is innocent. Why would he steal anything?'

The others were not convinced. Fortunately for me, some of the women who had gone to the temple returned just then. They heard the commotion and came to see what had happened. A girl named Usha ran into the room and said to the man, 'Your locket and money are with me. Last night, you were drunk and dancing and jumping, and the locket and the money fell on the floor. I picked it up for safekeeping.'

Everyone fell silent. The man came up to me, patted my head and said, 'Who are you? Why do you work here?'

I told him, and he and his friends took me out in his car. They bought me new clothes and dropped me back at the theatre. Rambha Maushi was not back yet, and the girls made me promise I would not let her know about this incident. They said it would only lead to fights and accusations. So I kept quiet about the whole thing, and Rambha Maushi heard nothing about it.





I left that very day for Nerla. At the bus stop I met Babya, who worked in another jalsa party. He was always telling me we should run away together to Mumbai. When he saw me leaving for Nerla he said, 'Arre Kishy, are you going back to Nerla? Don't go, let's run off to Mumbai instead. We can earn a lot of money there.'

'I don't want to go to Mumbai—I'm going to my village,' I told him. I wanted to finish my schooling and perhaps become a school teacher.

Two days after I reached Nerla, Jiji left for Barshi. My results were due in a couple of days. I missed Bai, but this time she had not even written me a letter. When my results were declared and I learnt that I had passed, I wrote the good news to Bai, but she never wrote back.

The summer came to an end, and school reopened. This year I had the money to buy my books; I did not need to ask Maushi and Ramesh *Kaka*. This was money I had earned at Barshi. I bought secondhand books for class six and hid the remaining fifty rupees. Ajoba knew I had some money with me.

'Looks like you have brought a lot of money back from Barshi. Give me some to buy a bottle, son.' I told him I had no more money, that I had spent it all on my books, but Ajoba was not fooled. He kept a strict eye on me. I used to hide my money under a broken tile up on the roof. One day, I took it down and put it in my school bag since I had a few things to buy. I bought a compass box and a pen and hid the change in the leaves of one of my notebooks. When I reached home, Ajoba sent me off to the farm to get some dried cow-dung cakes. I hung my school bag on a nail and ran off. It was only when I reached the farm that I remembered I had left the money in the school bag. I quickly collected the cakes in a basket and ran all the way home. I took down the school bag and leafed through the notebook. The money was gone.

Accusing anyone of stealing would have invited a beating. So I said nothing, but anger burned in my heart.

In the evening Ajoba came back with bottles of liquor. Aji cooked fish and then sat down to drink, as she occasionally did, with Ajoba.





I was sitting outside watching them and listening to their conversation. The anger in my heart was turning into rage. Aji asked, 'Daru ku kadase paise laye?' (Where did you get the money to buy this alcohol?)

Before Ajoba could answer, I shouted, 'Give my money back! You should be ashamed of yourself, stealing a child's money. Grandfathers *give* money to their grandchildren, not steal from them.' My rage was spilling out and I could not control it. Those fifty rupees would have taken care of my school expenses for the whole year. And I had done all kinds of chores and back-breaking work to earn the money at Barshi.

Ajoba picked up his stick and charged at me, yelling, 'I'll beat you till you die, you varmint! How dare you insult me? Your mother has not left a pot of money here for you. You eat our food and dare to insult us. Get out of here.'

'Give me my money first and I will get out of here,' I retorted. 'Otherwise, I warn you, there will be none as bad as me.'

Ajoba hit me with his stick. I ran out of the house and threw a stone at him. I completely forgot that he was my grandfather. I was so consumed with rage. Everyone came out of the house and started yelling at me. Popat *Mama* caught me and started hitting me. I was screamed and shouted *at*, and the entire neighbourhood turned up to see what was going on. Mana Aji rescued me from Mama's clutches.

'Poor motherless child,' the neighbours whispered to each other. 'What harm has he done? These people lived on the earnings of his mother, and now they treat him like an animal. He works from morning to night. Not a leaf can stir in this house without him. They send him off to the fields at all hours of the day and night, and cosset their own sons like precious sand that will slip out of their hands. Kondi Dada has taken this child's money and is beating him on top of it.'

Popat Mama yelled at them, 'What are you doing here, creating a commotion? We'll solve our own problems without your comments. None of you need interfere.'

Mana Aji took me home, consoled me and gave me dinner. But I





was so upset I could hardly eat. I missed *Bai*. I wished I could go to her. But what was the use of going to Sonepeth? In a few days I would have to return to Nerla. Why didn't my mother let me live with her? Was I not her son? A million tormenting questions raced through my mind. I thought I would go mad.

One of our neighbours, Kantabai, had a car. She often went to Parali in it. I went to her and asked if she would take me to Sonepeth, but she said, 'You have school to attend, Kishya. This is your last year; just gird your loins and get through it. I will take you to Sonepeth in the summer. Anyway, your mother does not want you there for long, so why do you want to go there?'

I sadly returned to Mana Aji's house. I knew Kantabai had been fair and honest. I spent the night at Mana Aji's and she even agreed to let me stay with her for the rest of the year. My heart felt much lighter.

Early in the morning Aji came to me in tears and said, 'We are sorry, Kishya, we have wronged you. Please forgive us and come back home.' Susheela Maushi had also come with her, so I went back with them. What else could I do? I had neither home nor parents of my own.

I appeared for and passed my sixth-standard exams and joined the seventh standard. This meant I had to live at Nerla for only one more year, because the school at Nerla went no further than the seventh. The school had no English teacher, and I could not read or write even ABC though I was in class seven.

A million new fears now haunted me. Who would pay for my education beyond class seven? I would have to go to Karmala or another big town to study further.

Ajoba had decided that I need not study any further. 'You have studied up to the seventh and that is enough,' he said. 'More, in fact, than any Kolhati boy. There is no need to study any further. It is not as if you're going to get a job or something. You better learn to work in the fields or join the jalsa party and learn to play the *dholak*. I can buy you a couple of buffaloes and half a dozen goats.'

My mother had given up dancing, had run away from life in a





jalsa party. And now her own son would play the dholak and make other women dance to his rhythms? The very thought made me sick. Sometimes, I dreamt that Bai had tied ghungroos round her feet and was dancing on stage while I played the dholak. I would wake from a deep sleep sweating with panic. Then I would spend the rest of the night sleepless with anxiety and despair.

Every parent wants his or her child to study, to find a respectable place for himself in society. So why didn't my mother feel the same way? Why did she not want me to be well educated? What would I be in a few years—a dacoit or a thief? A goatherd? A drummer in a *tamasha* party? Why doesn't my mother worry about this? Does she never wonder what's happening in my life? What's happening to me? My head spun with these thoughts.

Once or twice in a year, Bai would send a money order for me. That, too, would be taken away by Ajoba. I had no chappals; I went barefoot to school. My shorts were usually torn at the seat. My mind and heart were bruised, and my body was tired with the needless chores I was made to do everyday.

It occurred to me one day that it would be an escape from the oppressive drudgery of my daily life if I went to Sonepeth and told Bai, 'If you are ashamed to tell people I am your son, then tell them I am your servant. Let me stay with you and I will do all of your work. You will have help, you will not have to feel ashamed of me and my education will be taken care of.'

Then I thought, if she still refuses to let me live with her, I will run away to Mumbai with Babya. I decided to go to Sonepeth the next day—but I had no money for the journey. So I sold my old class-six books and a few chickens from the farm. Without telling anyone, I left for Sonepeth.

When Bai saw me, she looked delighted, but I could sense that her feelings were mixed. Was she, perhaps, not so happy to see me after all? I wondered. I was afraid that after five or six days she would send me back to Nerla. I could not find the courage to ask Bai to let me stay with her. I didn't know what *Nana* would say, and everybody was afraid of Nana. No one dared say much to him. Besides, Bai's





home was a tin-roofed room with a kitchen and a small cot on one side. It was so tiny that when Nana was home, one had to sit in front of him. Would Nana think I would crowd the room too much if I lived there? The next room housed the flour mill. A large window in the wall connected the two rooms so that Bai could keep an eye on the flour mill and take money from her clients. She often had to interrupt her cooking to look after the clients at the mill.

There was one servant at the flour mill. He belonged to Mothi Ai's village and had lived with Nana since he was a young lad. We used to call him Mama. He lived and ate in the house.

I helped Bai around the house and with the cooking. Nana and Bai were amazed that I could cook a meal. The day before *Gudi Padwa*, the Indian New Year, Bai started her periods, and according to custom she did not cook or even touch things around the house while menstruating. She was very worried because on Padwa, *puranpoli* had to be made, and all the workers in the house and the field were invited to lunch. She did not know who would do the cooking for her.

The next day, I woke up at 4 a.m., had a bath, did the puja and filled fresh water from the tap. 'I'll make bhakri or some *poha* for Nana's breakfast,' I said to Bai, and I disappeared behind the curtain that separated the kitchen from the rest of the room.

Bai had to stay away from the kitchen and from most things in the room, so she decided to sit in the flour mill and keep an eye on things there. She had no idea what I was doing in the kitchen. Nana and Deepak were asleep on the bed. Everything needed for the festive meal had already been bought, so I got down to work. I boiled the gram, mashed it, cooked it with sugar and made puranpolis. I also made *amti* and put the rice on the fire to cook. By 9 o'clock the meal was ready.

Mama came in from the mill and moved the curtain aside to see who was cooking. When he saw the meal, he called out, 'Akka' (everyone in Sonepeth called Bai 'Akka'), come and see, Kishore has made puranpolis.' Bai looked in through the window and was astounded. Neither she nor Mama could believe their eyes.





Nana woke up, bathed and asked Bai, 'What's for lunch?'

Bai said, 'Just wait a few minutes.'

When Nana saw the puranpolis, he asked, 'Who has made these?'

He could not believe I had cooked the meal. Everybody ate lunch—the washerwoman, the cattle-shed cleaner, the woman who washed utensils, I served everybody and then Bai, Deepak and I ate. The next day the cleaner said to Bai, 'That was a very tasty meal you gave us yesterday. I have never eaten such good amti before.'

'My elder son cooked it,' Bai said proudly. My heart swelled with joy. It was the first time she had publicly called me her son.

At the end of Bai's four days of menstruation, I bathed her (women did not bathe during their periods) and helped her wash her hair. Then I gave her a hot meal. I had taken over the responsibility of collecting money from the clients at the flour mill, so I sat at the mill keeping an eye on things. Bai depended on me more and more. Nana said to her, 'Doesn't Kishore ever get tired and fed up? You should tell your beloved Deepak to learn something from him. Dear Deepak starts crying at the very thought of work.'

Nana and Bai decided that I should stay on at Sonepeth with them and continue my studies there. My happiness seemed to fill the skies.

When school reopened, Nana sent a letter to the Nerla school asking them to send my admission and transfer papers to the school at Sonepeth. The Sonepeth school also sent them a letter, but the papers never came. Kondiba Ajoba had ensured that they would not be sent because he was furious that I was not returning to Nerla. After a fortnight Nana went personally to Nerla to bring the papers, and I joined the senior school at Sonepeth.

'If anyone asks your caste,' Bai told me, 'say you are a Sali, because I am a Sali.'

My admission papers clearly stated that I was a Kolhati, but I had to do what Bai said. The truth always comes out, however, so my little lie lasted only for a few short days. The teachers and students





wondered about me and my name.

‘He is said to be Krushnarao Wadkar’s son,’ they whispered behind my back. ‘Why, then, is his name Kishore Shantabai Kale? Krushnarao Wadkar is of the Sali caste but Kishore’s paper says he is a Kolhati. So whose son is he?’

Some said I had no father at all. I was aware of all the speculation about me, and in the beginning, I dreaded going to school. But I soon got used to it.

Nobody at school made friends with me. For days I kept to myself, quietly attending classes and then going home. Finally two boys, Deepak Lande and Sanjay Lande, started talking to me, but the others teased them and called them names for befriending me, and soon they too kept away. I had a lot of trouble with my studies. I knew no English at all, and the rest of the class could read and write the language. Everybody made fun of my pronunciation. I was also slapped by the teacher for my inability to deal with English.

At Nerla I had grown used to having one teacher for all subjects. But at Sonepeth there was a different teacher for each subject. I found this very disconcerting.

I studied in the flour mill. I had to look after the mill, too, and collect money from the clients and keep the accounts. Nana left home at 8 p.m. every evening and returned at 4 a.m. the next morning. He spent the whole night playing cards at the club, the rest of the day he slept. He usually woke up at five in the evening and asked for the daily accounts of the flour mill. I always wrote them down very neatly—money collected, money spent and money due. Both households, Bai’s and Mothi Ai’s, ran on earnings from the mill.

At school, my English gradually improved, as did my speech and behaviour, and I appeared less of a country bumpkin. But my workload, which had remained the same in the beginning, also changed—for the worse. Though the physical labour was about the same, the mental pressures were much more at Sonepeth.

Nana used to dabble in *matka*. When he won, he was full of smiles, but when he lost, all his anger and frustration was poured on us. It was the same when he lost at cards. Then I was beaten up out of his





sheer anger and frustration. At Nerla, I had learnt to be stoic about my troubles. But at Sonepeth, it was very hard to watch the pain Bai had to bear. Nana often went away for three or four days at a stretch. Many people told Bai he visited a jalsa party. Rambha Maushi and other girls from the party even wrote to Bai telling her that Nana was seeing another dancer. But Bai said nothing, and bore the pain in silence.

Deepak used to eat bread with his morning tea before Nana woke up. Bai would offer us all kinds of food before Nana awoke. It was something I never understood. Why this secrecy from Nana? Why did she have to hide from Nana what we ate in the house? Deepak was a poor eater, and though he was in class four, he still fed from Bai's breasts. He loved fruit, so Bai sent me to buy fruit every day. Sometimes I bought mangoes, sometimes dates. It was all done without Nana's knowledge, of course. Deepak ate the fruit I bought, but he never offered me a bite. Bai never offered me any, either. I tried not to let it bother me, because I knew that Bai loved Deepak more than she loved me. I was able to complete my education at Sonepeth, and for that alone I was grateful. I knew that Nana and Bai needed a servant, and that's why I was allowed to stay with them. I understood and accepted why I had been allowed to live at Sonepeth now that I was older, and not when I was a child.

I passed my seventh-standard examination. Then we heard that Jiji was ill, so I went to Nerla to see her. I was hardly recognized there! Everyone exclaimed at the change in me, in the way I looked and talked. Old friends and neighbours were delighted to see me, thinking my years of banishment had ended. Only I knew that my troubles were far from over, that my life would never be easy. I sometimes felt that perhaps death alone would release me from my burdens.

When I was about to leave for Nerla, Bai and Nana asked me to look for a good old woman or a young girl who could come and live with us to help Bai in the house. At Nerla, Susheela Maushi was so impressed with the change in me that she asked if I could take her daughter, Jaya, with me. Jaya was then in class three, and I agreed that she would be the ideal choice for a helper for Bai. She could help





around the house and go to school in a bigger town.

Once Jaya came to Sonepeth, my burdens eased a little and I had more time to study. She was admitted to school there, and she helped Bai around the house. Nana, however, continued his trips to the jalsa parties. He was now away for five days every week. Bai knew exactly what was happening but could do nothing except worry. What could stop Nana from bringing another woman home? She vented all her pent-up anxiety and anger on me. Two beautiful wives in the house and Nana still had to find new women at jalsa parties. It's true: a leopard can never change its spots.

Nana returned home after a few days, but Bai had stopped talking to him. Nana had his meals at Mothi Ai's house and spent some of his waking hours there so he could avoid talking to Bai. A few days later, a jalsa party came to Sonepeth, and again Nana spent his days and nights there. He had forged a relationship with a dancer named Shalan and spent enormous amounts of money on her. When he ran out of cash, he started selling things from the house. For days on end, Nana did not sleep at home. I could understand my mother's feelings. She felt uncertain and insecure, afraid she would be abandoned. She was in the grip of such sorrow and despair that she spent all her time in prayer, oblivious to anything else in the house. With Jaya's help, I did all the cooking.

Finally, one day, Bai and Mothi Ai decided they would go to the jalsa party and confront Nana there. But Mothi Ai was so frightened of Nana that she trembled at the thought of doing battle with him. Although she tried, she could not gather the courage, and finally she refused to go to the jalsa party with us.

At 11 p.m. that evening Bai, Jaya and I set off towards the place where the tamasha was being held. But our neighbour's son saw us and ran ahead to warn Nana. Nana left the tamasha and started off briskly down the lane behind the municipal building. We ran after him, but Nana was faster and reached home before we did. When we entered the room, Nana was in a towering rage.

'Where did you go wandering at this hour of the night?' he shouted at Bai. 'You step out of the house at this hour again and I'll break your legs.'





Bai was menstruating then, so Nana started beating Jaya up, yelling, 'How can she be better? She will also be true to her caste.' Nana beat Jaya until she nearly fainted. Finally, Bai could bear no more and caught Nana by the neck. We were all screaming and wailing. Nana let go of Jaya and started beating Bai. I ran out to get a stone to hit him with, but Nana caught me and beat me severely.

'Children of a tamasha dancer!' Nana shouted. He turned on Jaya again. 'Her mother's arse! Who asked her to intervene in my business?'

Jaya was so frightened that she ran away from the house. 'Like mother, like daughter,' said Nana in disgust, watching her disappear down the lane.

Then he turned on us: 'And what is wrong with all of you? Wailing away as if somebody had died in the house!'

Nana picked up the images of the gods from Bai's little puja place and threw them at her. When she was menstruating Bai did not touch anything or anyone in the house, and touching her gods was blasphemous. (It is an orthodox Indian belief that women are unclean when they menstruate, so for four days they do not touch anything in the house.) But there was Nana throwing them at her.

Bai screamed at Nana, 'You first ensure that I have a place and an income to live on before you go off to other women. You begged me to leave the jalsa party and come and live with you here; I did not chase you. You love to taste different flesh every day, but I am not that kind of person. You settle me properly and then you can go where you like. You promised to buy me fields when you brought me here, but it is twelve years now, and you have still not kept your word. I have lived in this horrible shed, have worn old and torn saris. You have wheedled all my gold jewellery from me and gambled it away. You have taken everything, and now you want me to go? Where do you think I can go? How will I look after my children? Give me an income that will support me, and a proper roof over our heads, and you can keep as many women as you like.'

Bai was sobbing loudly. 'I didn't ask to be brought here,' she said. 'Don't ruin me.'





‘What do I care?’ sneered Nana. ‘Go find another man—you’re free to go now. Obviously I have not satisfied you.’

That was the last straw for Bai. She had been completely faithful to Nana, though he had treated her so badly. She had abandoned her son, severed contact with her family and done everything she could to make him happy. After all that, Nana had so easily told her to simply walk out of his life. Bai charged at him, shouting, ‘I will not leave you and go anywhere. Even if you die, I will follow you to the cremation ground and boil your bones and eat them. Neither you nor your ancestors can escape me now. I did not leave everything behind and come and live here with you just to leave at a moment’s notice like this. I broke all our social rules, did not give a second thought to my parents, even abandoned my child—and you think I will simply go away now? I spent all my youth with you and now you tell me to go?’

Nana attacked Bai again, more viciously than before. I could have killed Nana, but because of Bai I controlled myself. At 2.30 a.m. that morning Bai ran out of the house. We chased after her. She headed straight for the river and was about to jump in when I caught her sari and pulled her back.

‘Why did you give birth to us when you could not look after us?’ I cried.

Nana came and took us back home. If we had not returned to Nana’s tin room, where else could we have gone? Even if we had to go away in a fit of rage, society would have accused us of deserting him. ‘She was a dancer,’ people would have said. ‘She must have had some affair, that’s why the man had to throw her out.’ We would have been unable to live in Sonepeth. That’s why Bai went home quietly.

The very next day Nana went away again. We were all very worried. We knew that he was doing all he could to throw Bai out of his house. But what could we do? Where could we go? Bai met all the influential people of the town—Nanasaheb Jahagirdar, Dattopant Paralkar, even some relatives and friends, but nobody wanted to interfere. They were all afraid of Nana’s temper. Bai could find no





solution to her dilemma; she cried all the time.

Nana periodically returned to Sonepeth, and beat us black and blue each time. I grew angry and fed up.

‘Strangle us and let us die,’ I said to Bai. ‘Then do whatever you want. But if you die first, what will happen to us? We’ll be begging on the streets, or robbing or thieving. I’m not going to listen to you any more. I’m going to kill Nana.’

I picked up a stone and started running down the road where Nana had just gone. Bai caught me and said, ‘Arre Kishore, don’t do that. Kill me if you must, but don’t kill him.’

After all this, Bai still cared for Nana.

The next day Nana went off again. Shalan’s jalsa party left town, but Nana did not return for a week. Jaya was miserable and thin with worry and fear. She fought with Bai and shouted at her, but Bai did not react or even answer. At last Jaya wrote to her mother, and Susheela Maushi came to Sonepeth. The day she arrived there was no food in the house, and no kerosene even to light the stove. Maushi gave me some money to buy rice and I sat down to cook some khichdi. There was no wood to light the cooking fire, so I tried to start the fire with twigs and wood shavings. It smoked terribly and made my eyes water. I started coughing and Maushi came and lit the fire for me. Bai was crying in a corner. She could not do or say anything.

‘If I were in your place,’ Maushi said to her, ‘I would have committed suicide by now. Why live like a dog?’

Nana came home that day and asked me to buy some sago and pound it into a powder. Sabudana is not easy to powder, and I struggled with it. Susheela Maushi watched me and said, ‘God is really testing you, isn’t He, Kishore? How much is He going to put you through? Even here, living with your mother, your life is no better than a dog’s.’

Susheela Maushi took Jaya away to Nerla. After she left, Bai and I went to Parbhani to visit Ramrao Lonikar, an MLA. When Bai was with the jalsa party at Selu, the MLA had accepted her as his foster sister. Nagin Maushi, then a sixteen-year-old dancer, had captivated Lonikar, and he had brought her away from the tamasha and set her





up in a house of her own. Over the years, Nagin Maushi had been treated with respect and affection, and she now had three sons and a daughter. Bai and Nagin Maushi were good friends. We poured out all our troubles to Nagin Maushi, hoping her sympathy would influence Lonikar to help us somehow.

When we got home, we found Deepak sitting alone, looking forlorn and miserable. Tears ran down his face, but he did not say a word. Nana was nowhere to be seen. Bai took off Deepak's shirt to give him a bath and almost recoiled from the sight of his back—it was black and blue and there were weals all over it. The skin had peeled off in some places; in other places, there were dark splotches of congealed blood. The neighbours, when they heard us come into the house, called Bai and told her, 'Nana beat him up like an animal. This poor child was rolling on the floor with pain but the man kept on hitting him. Even when Deepak ran out of the house, Nana chased him and thrashed him as if he were an animal. Many people saw what was happening but nobody came to the poor child's rescue.'

Deepak could not say a word. Silent tears ran down his cheeks and Bai and I wept with him.

Nana returned on a Monday. Bai did not say a word to him because she wanted no acrimony on a Monday. Monday was her day of fasting, and she used to ritually wash Nana's feet in a *thali* with water from the Ganga, then wipe them, apply *haldi* and *kumkum*, wash them again and drink the water. When Nana sat on the bed, Bai brought the *thali* and the *lota* and placed it at his feet. Nana kicked the water over, much to Bai's horror, and he and Bai had another big fight. Nana stomped off to the sitting room in the other part of the house to sleep. It was summer and Bai's room was unbearably hot, but she was unaware of the heat. She sat in front of her gods, crying and asking, 'What should I do now? What will become of me? Where will I go?'

As if in reply, Nana came rushing into the room, saying, 'Snake! Snake! There's a cobra in the sitting room with its hood spread out, ready to strike. It twice struck at a piece of paper lying near my head.'

Bai rushed into the sitting room and saw the cobra with its raised





head and hood. The cobra is symbolic of Lord Shiva, who wears one round his neck, and Monday is Shiva's day. Bai fasted and prayed to Shiva every Monday. She folded her hands and gently bowed before the snake in the sitting room. The snake lowered its hood. By then, Narayan Mama had brought the snake charmer, who caught the snake and took it away. But the story spread like wildfire throughout the neighbourhood. People were wonderstruck, especially those who had seen the deadly serpent. Nana was very subdued. He was now convinced that if he were not good to Bai, the gods would punish him. Nana believed it was Bai's prayers that Shiva himself had answered in the guise of the snake. Never again did he hit Bai. What's more, he stopped going to tamashas and visiting other dancers.

Nana had incurred an enormous debt due to his gambling at cards. He decided to sell one of his fields, repay the debt and use the rest of the money to buy another piece of land. The money from the sale of the field was lying in the cupboard when the dates for the municipal elections were announced. Nana was a member of the municipal council but had done no work at all. He knew that people were angry with him and would not reelect him. However, Bai and I set out to work as hard as we could for him—we campaigned for him all over his constituency, and I spent hours every night painting election slogans on public walls. None of Nana's other relatives came forward to help. Well-known leaders like ex-MLA Uttamrao Vitkar, Shivaji Mahajan and others visited Nana's constituency and distributed *jowar* to the people in exchange for promises of votes; but Nana did not visit his own ward even once because he was convinced he was going to lose.

The elections ended and the counting began. Bai sat before her gods and prayed. Nana's opponent, Vishwanath Bansode, the BJP candidate, polled an identical number of votes. It was decided that a toss of a coin would decide the winner. Nana won. Hundreds of people came rushing to our house with the good news.

Nana felt it was only Bai's prayers that had brought him this good luck. He draped Bai with the first garland of flowers that was brought to him. 'It was because of you that I won,' he said. 'You have





helped me hold my head high in society.'

The money in the cupboard had been freely used during the campaign, and it was nearly all gone. Bai kept telling Nana that he should buy land as soon as possible, before all the money vanished.

'Buy it in your name,' she urged him. 'It doesn't have to be in my name. Take whatever is left of my jewellery if you need to.'

A piece of prime land belonging to one Deshmukh came up for sale. Many people in town were interested in this land, but Bai met Deshmukh's aunt and told her all her problems. Shripadrao Deshmukh promised Bai that he would sell the land to her and no one else. Nana bought six acres of land in my name and six in Bai's. All these years Nana had been afraid that we would simply leave any day, but after the snake incident and the election victory, he finally felt certain he could trust us.

Translated from Marathi by Sandhya Pandey



From *Upara*, by Laxman Mane

The Outsider

When I was in the tenth standard, I occasionally saw films with my classmates or with Narayan and Ramdas. I would rush into the crowd, surge ahead to get the tickets and buy four or five extras to sell at a premium, thus recovering my ticket money.

Mathematics and English were my enemies...we never seemed to get along. I would feel sleepy during the maths period. The teacher would get angry with me, but I could not stop dozing. Classes began with English, so I entered the classroom when the first period was over. I even started chasing a girl. She never talked to me, but I followed her wherever she went. If she had no class, I would bunk mine. I wrote many letters to her, but all of them were carried away by canal water.

The final examination drew closer. My class was going on an excursion to Panhala, Jotiba and Kolhapur. I had never gone on an excursion before. Many students had registered for the trip and I, too, very much wanted to go. I wanted to enjoy myself. It would be great fun, I thought. But they were charging fifty rupees for it, and in my case where would the money come from? A mere mention of this at home would bring down all hell. I could have got five or ten rupees from my friends, but it was not possible to raise the hefty sum of fifty rupees. I asked many people but no one obliged. The only consolation was that Narayan was also not going. Our classmates teased us, talking about it all the time.

The day of the excursion approached. My mind blocked up. I was enveloped in darkness. Whenever I felt very low, I would go to the bank of the canal and cry my heart out, returning when I felt lighter.





And then a new way opened for me. There was a notice board in front of Rudrabhat's shop saying that a boy was wanted to sell newspapers. I seized the opportunity and took up the job. So my morning work increased by two hours—up to six o'clock in the morning, I sold bread and butter, and at nine the newspaper van arrived at the bus stand. I had to bring the bundle of newspapers to the shop, where they were to be arranged properly and then sold in the street. I called aloud their titles, such as *Kesari*, *Sakal* and *Sahyadri*. Some of them I had to deliver to subscribers' houses. This would go on up to eleven o'clock. These morning manoeuvres fetched me about one-and-a-half rupees.

Then, gulping some *misal* and *bhajeas* in Karne's restaurant, tucking my shirt into my khaki shorts and picking up my books and notebooks, I would rush to school. I had to hurry to reach the school on time, but still the prayer was usually over by the time I entered the classroom. The teacher punished latecomers by beating them with the hard string of his whistle or with a baton. Sometimes he ordered them to clean the ground by way of punishment. I had to take such punishments without a word of protest. For me, classes invariably began with the second period.

One day, classes were as usual but it turned out to be an unusual day. I removed the empty cups and saucers that were lying on the tables in Karne's restaurant until it was seven o'clock. Then I drank a cup of tea, which was, of course, free of charge. Then I picked up my school bag and went towards our classroom. The bus stand was close by.

By the roadside and under the street lamp, a crowd of people had gathered almost in circles. Each one was trying to go forward through the circle. I joined the crowd. Pushing people aside, I went forward. At the centre, a few young men were gambling with three playing cards. Taking them up quickly, he was showing them to the crowd. A man in the crowd risked a stake of ten rupees on one of the three cards. He recognized the card correctly and got back twenty rupees. I inched forward and took a great interest in the game. The trickster threw the king on the ground, the queen and the jack on the reverse very skillfully. If the man who risked the stake failed to recognise the





correct card, he would lose his money. If he won, he would get double the amount.

I sat for a long time watching the game. My school bag was still in my hand. I knew that if someone saw me sitting here, I would be in trouble. But I continued to watch the game, thinking nobody would recognize me in such a crowd. I bought a cigarette and a paan from the nearby stall and began smoking the cigarette and chewing the betel leaf. Then I pulled out the lower half of my shirt from under my shorts, put my cap in my pocket, threw my books and notebooks in the *paanwallah's* stall and came back. With my own eyes, I watched currency notes come and go.

I had two or three rupees on me. I risked a stake of one rupee. I won, and the guy gave me back two rupees. I played again and again, and every time I won, I collected about seven rupees. I was no longer afraid of gambling or being recognized—I was intoxicated by winning. At one point I spat the betel-leaf juice into a gutter close by. A few particles of the reddish-brown spray fell on the back of one of the cards. They could not be easily seen by anyone else. The number of onlookers had fallen. I kept my eye glued to that particular card and was thus able to identify it and cash in on it. Within two or three hours, I was up by seventy rupees.

The trickster playing the cards had grown very angry. He was watching the cards very closely but could not find the secret of my success. He was losing both money and his temper. 'How does the bugger always get to know that this king's mother gets screwed?' he exclaimed.

He stopped the game for a while and took a new set of cards out of his pocket. When I saw it, I stopped playing. Immediately, I was surrounded by six or seven ruffians, who started abusing me.

'Hey, you! Mother-fucker! Come, sister-screw! What's wrong?' I was scared. I realized that I had been a fool to gamble like this. They advanced towards me, and I didn't know how to escape.

'Come! Play!' they insisted.

'No,' I kept saying.

When I refused to play any further, I was slapped hard. The blow





cut my lip and I started to bleed. I was not in a position to resist. They were quite a gang. They punched me all over my body: stomach, back ... I began to howl. The number of onlookers began to swell again. They asked each other what had happened. In the melee, the ruffians and the trickster disappeared with all my money. I was beaten up mercilessly. Cleaning the blood from my mouth with my hand and taking back my books and notebooks from the stall of the paanwallah, I hurried away before the police arrived on the scene. My body ached. It was like the rape of a dumb girl who could neither shout nor complain. I had to suffer silently. For two days, I could neither work nor could go to school.

The final examination ended and vacation began. Father came to Phaltan and took me home. It was time for me to play in the band until the marriage season was over. I was no longer interested in the village and its ambience. I visited Phaltan every five days. Naturally, I had to give up selling newspapers.

During the season, the Kurvali festival took place along with the sacrifice of the goats. As usual, the goats were hung in trees and gods and goddesses were invoked. Those who had taken the vow of penitence fell flat on the ground and rolled forward to accomplish it.

That year, a Kaikadi husband had lodged an unusual complaint with the panchayat against his young and good-looking wife. His complaint was that his wife had taken a Vadari lover and abandoned him.

'In the past, she had four or five abortions, but now she is pregnant,' her husband declared before the panchayat. 'She is an adulteress ... I am not the father of the child she is carrying. I want to leave her. Please, annul my marriage to her!'

The panchayat took up the matter with the witnesses, evidence and guarantor. Everything was done according to the rules and regulations of the panchayat. Both parties remitted panchayat fees. Country liquor was served in abundance.

In whose favour would the verdict go? In favour of the woman or





her husband? One member of the panchayat snapped at the plaintiff: 'Idiot! You are not man enough, so what's the problem if your wife found a way to satisfy her hunger outside the marriage? What will you do with a second wife?'

Hearing this, the young husband hissed furiously, like a wounded cobra, and shouted back, 'You swine! Bring your wife here before the panchayat! You'll see how I'll make her pregnant on the spot!'

This was enough to set off a bloody fight. Expecting pandemonium, the crowd dispersed. The women held their little ones closely and scampered away. However, the members of the panchayat pacified the fighters.

The panchayat excommunicated the woman. Their marriage was nullified. After taking its rightful fees from the husband, the panchayat allowed him to remarry. The woman cried all the time now. People laughed at her. Her husband had managed to swing the verdict in his favour by pouring a huge quantity of country liquor down the throats of the members of the panchayat. In reality, it was he who had kept a Vadari woman as his mistress. The excommunicated woman went mad, and never recovered from the shock. She delivered a baby, but no one knew what happened to it!

After the Kurvali festival, the Kaikadi families returned to Phaltan. They settled in front of the Shanti Cinema House and lighted their home fires. I feared that if we stopped here and were spotted by other kids from our school, we'd be laughed at and made fun of. So Datya Kaikadi's son Ithlea and I left our huts and went to the village by a shortcut, which led to the bus stand. It was about 9.30 at night and dark outside. Behind the bus stand was the Ghadsuli Slum. We walked in the dark, smoking and telling each other interesting stories of the festival.

Suddenly a middle-aged woman came forward through the darkness and called out, 'Hey! Big guys!' We stopped.

'What is it?' Ithlea asked. Now I could see the thick layers of white face powder on her face, and her painted mouth.

'You big kids! Want to have a session with me?'

We didn't understand what she was saying.





‘But where?’ I asked.

‘Follow me,’ she said.

We two made a sign to each other. We were curious to know what the ‘session’ was, so we followed her. We went past four or five huts.

‘See that you don’t put your feet into the gutter, or you’ll spoil my bed.’ With these words, she pushed open the door of her hut.

Inside, a kerosene lamp burned brightly. A gunny bag was spread on the floor, which was covered with a sheet. An empty pot for preparing tea, a broken cup and a piece of cloth (filter) were lying in a corner. We stood in the doorway, as we hardly knew what to do! What she was saying was not very clear to us.

Ithlea went in first and I followed. The woman was talking in a relaxed way. To know better what she was saying, I moved ahead. When she started closing the door, I got scared.

‘Let her go to hell!’ I thought. ‘There’s something fishy going on here.’ I started to get up. I pinched Ithlea to suggest that we should leave. Pressing the door shut and looking at Ithlea, the woman said, ‘Hey, boys! How much money do you have? Come, say it...you want to just sit there and look at me or you want to have a session?’

At this point, I started shivering.

Ithlea asked her, ‘Money for what?’

She was quick to reply. ‘You fool! You think the session is free of charge or what?’

Ithlea did not want to listen to me. I felt an urge to piss. By then I knew there was something fishy going on.

Once again I signalled to Ithlea that we should leave. Immediately the woman shouted at me, ‘Eh! You little nipper, sit down! Have a paan, smoke a cigarette. You seem to be in a hurry to go and piss!’ And she spat in a corner.

I kept quiet, Ithlea had twelve *annas* in his pocket. I had no money.

‘I charge five rupees a session! What can you do with twelve annas?’ she said, as she snatched the twelve annas. The woman began fluently mouthing all sorts of obscenities, and I was almost shocked. After clearing Ithlea’s pockets, she asked me, ‘How much money do





you have, young fellow?’

I pretended to search my pockets. I had no money at all. As I was preparing to go, she roared, ‘Swine! These days you can’t get even vegetables free of charge, and you filthy sod, you have the guts to come for free friction? Get up and piss off!’ With these words, she rushed towards me menacingly.

I was so confounded—I could not understand what was happening. I ran away as fast as I could, and stopped only when I reached the bus stand. Ithlea left the place five minutes later and came up behind me. I called him names...in my mind. However, I was still curious to know what the woman might have told him, so I waited there until he came and disclosed it to me.

Ithlea was grinning from ear to ear. Oh, God! What was it? That woman had almost thrown me out and this one was laughing like mad. I was dying of curiosity. When he came closer, I greeted him with the choicest of abuses. He just wouldn’t stop laughing. He bought us a couple of paans. As the bus stand took on a deserted look, we settled down on an old bench. I asked him again what had happened, and once again he burst out laughing.

‘You have studied so much, but you have acquired no knowledge. You know? Even eight annas would have been sufficient!’ Stretching my curiosity even further, he said, ‘Had I four annas more, I would have had the session.’

Now this ‘session’ business was getting a bit too much for me. Ithlea was younger than I, very simple to look at...yet he knew what ‘session’ meant and I didn’t. It made me feel awful. When I kept quiet, he said, ‘You see! You ran away and she showed me the circus.’

‘Now! Why do not you speak clearly? How did you see the circus in that hut?’ I couldn’t make heads or tails of what he was saying.

He continued to laugh and confused me more and more. He wouldn’t come clean...purposely. Then, losing my patience, I screamed, ‘Let your mother be screwed! Get lost!’ and I got up to go away.

He came round. ‘Well! Sit down,’ he said. ‘I’ll tell you. After you left, she took off her sari and allowed me to see. Well! I saw, that’s it!





All that fun for twelve annas. Had I had a whole rupee, I could have done something.'

I felt crestfallen. For an instant, I thought I had lost the opportunity. But the way he described the scene again and again...I felt sick. Up to 12 o'clock at night, he was telling me things about girls. And I learned for the first time that all this went on like a trade.

A thought came into my mind... 'Damn it! What a fool I am!' I'd been writing letters to the one I admired—I had not been aware of this shortcut. I went back to school thinking again and again that I would ask the one admired how much money she wanted.

As it happened she spoke to me only once, and that was when her father was transferred to some other town and she informed every student in the class of her impending departure. When she came to say goodbye to me, too, for a moment I thought I might break down. But I held myself together. Except for watching helplessly, what could I do?

My entire summer vacation was spent playing in the band during the marriage season. Tenth-standard examination results came out. I passed, and was promoted to class eleven. I thought I had become a person in my own right. 'Next year I'll go to college,' I thought. I was thrilled with the idea. I offered sweets to Maruti and Kalubai. Everybody in the house was happy. Mother was thrilled beyond words. For a week, she told whoever was willing to listen that her son had passed the examination.

One day the whole village was going to attend a wedding. The marriage party left late in the afternoon, the women and children moving about noisily. The party consisted of a hundred and one finely decorated bullock carts. The bullocks were also decked out, their backs covered with shawls. The carts' wooden railings were draped with garlands of currency notes.

This marriage in the house of Barge was like a village festival, he being a very rich man. He had been the first in the village to buy a tractor. Every year he sent the maximum quantity of sugarcane to the factory. About fifty men worked in his fields. This was the wedding of Barge's eldest daughter. The whole village was invited. The





ceremony of dressing the girl with a sari for the first time was celebrated by inviting the whole village for a grand meal. A bangle merchant was instructed to slip glass bangles on the wrists of every women and girl in the village irrespective of her caste, creed or religion. The celebration went on for three days, starting with the engagement, and guests were served tea and meals on all three days. Even the engagement was celebrated with fanfare. Four or five weddings of poor people could have been held with the expenses of the engagement ceremony alone.

The groom's father was a match for the bride's father. When the villagers came for the ceremony of applying vermilion to the boy's forehead, each was given a bath towel and a cap in two separate packets. With the expenses of these items alone, four or five humbler weddings could have been arranged. The entire village was delighted that the girl was marrying into a happy and prosperous family—this is why the bride's marriage party was going to the boy's village in one hundred and one bullock carts.

Ours being the band of the same village, we were hired to play during the wedding ceremony. Patana's band, from Phalton, was already there. In addition, the band of one Zerea had arrived from Baramati. All the three hands were hired by the bride's father.

The marriage party started throwing handfuls of vermilion in the air, to the accompaniment of our band. We played while the marriage party crossed the boundary of each village. We were accommodated in a separate bullock cart. About twelve of us sat in the cart, packed together. Thus the caravan of the marriage-party left for Kamblisar. We played in every village we passed till we reached our destination. Almost the entire village was included in the marriage party.

The bullock-cart owners had decked out their bullocks. Those who had young ladies in their carts were inspired to show off, every cart owner wanting his cart to move ahead of the others, and twisted the tails of his bullocks. As a result, the carts began speeding noisily, raising clouds of dust into the air. At times, one bullock would suddenly squat in the middle of the road, or the wheel of one of the carts would come off.





In this joyful manner, the marriage party reached Kamblisar at nightfall. We played while the party passed through this village. People flocked on both sides of the road to witness the colourful procession.

A huge bungalow in Kamblisar was placed at the disposal of the bride's party. By the time the ceremony of applying turmeric to the bride started, it was dawn. Our eyes hurt, and so did my hands, from playing the drum all the time. The women had not still finished applying turmeric to the bride. Father received in the fold of his dhoti some wet grain and a paisa from each of the women. As a result, his *dhoti* fold swelled into a big bundle.

Towards morning, the turmeric ceremony was finally over. The ceremony of applying turmeric to the bridegroom was carried out in his house.

On the wedding day proper, the rush was in full swing. Guests were to come from about ten villages in the neighbourhood. Whenever a guest of honour arrived, someone from the bridegroom's family would say, 'Hey! Where are the musicians?' Then we would rush to usher the guests into the wedding *pandal*, playing all the while. As this was a wedding in an illustrious family, all the political leaders of the region had also come.

In front of the bridegroom's house, a huge *pandal* was erected and beautifully decorated. The loudspeaker blared the details of the various ceremonies right from the morning. The bridegroom was highly educated, fair-complexioned, well-built and very well dressed. He looked like a prince. The *pandal* overflowed with guests. The wedding feast had begun in the morning; several thousand guests had already eaten. Young boys and girls were serving with a distinct pleasure. At some point in the day we took our meals, sitting in a separate row.

In the afternoon we, the musicians, led the bride to the temple. She was accompanied by about fifty bridesmaids, their assistants and about a hundred and fifty other guests. The bridegroom was also led by his musicians and accompanied by innumerable best men and other guests. Young boys and girls from both the sides engaged in





fun and frolic. The senior Barge and his brothers were busy doing various things. The bridegroom's friends had brought a camera to the yard of the temple and wanted to take a photo of the bride and groom. The groom's brother told the bride's brother, 'The groom wants to have his photo taken with his bride. Let the bride also sit on the swing.'

The young Barge remained expressionless. Then he said, 'You see, you are our guest of honour! The wedding ceremony is not over yet. What is the point in taking a photo at this juncture? Let the wedding ceremony finish—then you may take as many photos as you like.'

Well! That became the bone of contention! The news reached the groom, and he lost his temper. 'No matter what happens, I want the photo to be taken right now!' he said firmly. This was soon the topic of discussion throughout the crowd.

The seniormost Barge, the bride's father, was a patient man. He tried to explain to the groom the point in question. 'You see, my son-in-law, our tradition doesn't allow us to bring the bride and groom together before the wedding ceremony is over. Please have the photo taken after the wedding ceremony. If you want, I'll send for carloads of photographers from Baramati. Please, just don't insist on taking the photo now.'

The bridegroom asserted his position: 'Uncle! Why do you tell me to have the photo taken after the ceremony? We shall certainly take it then! So what if the wedding ceremony is not over? It will certainly take place in a short while. What's the harm if we take a photo just before the wedding?'

Since the groom disregarded him even in the presence of all these people, the Barge stood firm, suspecting some hidden plan. 'What the hell?' he thought. 'Only the ceremony of applying the turmeric is over. That doesn't mean that my daughter has already become this man's wife.' He explained again, 'You see, our guest of honour, our tradition doesn't permit photographing the bride and the groom before the wedding. So we cannot allow you to have the photo taken.'





The groom became equally adamant. He said, without mincing words, 'Uncle, listen! If you don't allow us to have the photo taken, this wedding will not take place. In my opinion, when the ceremony of applying turmeric is over, what more remains?'

That was when things became serious. The father-in-law and the son-in-law locked horns. People from both marriage parties began to divide, and news of the row over a photograph spread like wildfire throughout both parties and the whole village. On the one hand, Barge was boiling in rage, seeing his honour played with so flippantly. On the other hand, the bridegroom's family was furious that the girl's family had insulted them in their own village. Well-wishers and political leaders tried to intervene, but, in vain. The fire of dishonour and disrespect had spread. Each side was trying to run down the other with drunken abandon.

The bridegroom's father was known to be a cool man, but he, too, lost control over himself and started abusing the bride's family. 'Let a horse screw their mothers! I didn't know these people were of such bad character. They're quarrelling like Mahars and Mangs. The wedding will not resume until this photo is taken. If it's not, they can go back and screw their mothers! Let them know that I can fetch half a hundred similar wenches. When the head is intact, one can easily wear a thousand caps. And they're never in short supply.'

The people in each marriage party offered their support to the bride's people or the groom's, respectively. They stood in solidarity against each other. Things appeared to be heading for disaster, and fears were expressed that at least five hundred heads would be smashed. The young men from both sides, looking determined, took their positions against the rival camp, and it was not long before they began attacking each other.

Only then did the marriage parties come to their senses. 'Damn it! Why should we fight when this is a question of the honour of those from the other village?' Some people in the bride's marriage party took this defensive stance, whereas the others feared for their lives. So they ran and took shelter in the bungalow allotted to the bride's marriage party. Women and children were in utter confusion.





Those who were found by their menfolk were put on to their bullock carts and driven out of the village, one after the other. One could hear the bloody fight going on between the young men of the rival camps.

The bride's cousin, sensing trouble, put the bride in a bullock cart and drove it towards Sangvi as fast as the wind. Sensing danger, her father had already sent Ithlea and me to the bride's bungalow. Our hearts were knocking against our ribs as we thought of the danger. In a short while, most of the women and children were taken away in the bullock carts. There was such pandemonium that it was difficult to find out which side was winning. Father, Dattu, Appa and Tatyta took their musical instruments under their arms and ran away. They were awfully scared.

With shouts of 'Eh! He has been killed...come! Run away!' in the air, we the musicians took to our heels. A terrible din was going on in the village behind us! Taking whichever lane or bylane we saw before us, we reached the Somanthali. By then the night had advanced.

The next morning people gathered in front of Barge's house looking mournful. Three or four young men had been taken to the hospital; these were the sons of Barge's relatives. The wedding had turned into a disaster. Now, what about the girl? A question confronted Barge. He had a lot of money—what use was it now? The stain on the girl's heart was like a black stain on a white cloth. What could be done to remove it? She had received the shock of her life and had stopped eating. An early marriage was the solution, this being a question of her honour. Barge was immensely worried. Something untoward had happened that need not have happened...if only he had allowed the photograph to be taken! But it was not possible. And now it was not easy to find another groom for the girl. The wedding had not taken place, that's true, but the ceremony of applying turmeric had already been performed! The people stood in front of Barge's mansion without uttering a word.

Days passed, but Ratna, the unlucky bride, was never seen out of the house again. She was bedridden...she was still in a state of shock.





The usual activities resumed in the village. Uneasy calm descended on Barge's house. Time flew, and there was no sign of a marriage prospect for his daughter. He offered a great deal of gold and a fat dowry but nothing seemed to work. He grew weaker and weaker, day by day, and his daughter grew paler and paler. His honour was hitting the dust before his eyes. The women who came to see the girl said she was born under an inauspicious star. It would have been slightly better if she had become a widow soon after her marriage; she would at least have lived with the memories of a husband. But how was she to cope with this virgin widowhood?

One day, Father brought us the news: 'Barge Patil's Ratna has started screaming and shouting.'

Later he brought another piece of news: 'They say she laughs whenever she looks at someone. She won't keep her clothes on. She has fits...Barge has lost all his strength. His wife can't eat properly either, nor does she talk in a lively manner as she used to. Barge's mansion used to bubble with fun and activity, but since the tragedy struck, joy has fled from the house.'

Every year, prospective bridegrooms would come to see Ratna and go back where they came from. Frantic efforts would be made to strike a match, but the wedding seasons would come and go and Ratna's marriage was not arranged. Everything about the once prosperous household seemed to be on the decline, be it the number of family members or visitors or bullock carts.

I was studying at the high school in Phaltan. On Sunday, Mother would go there for the weekly market. Her face looked pale. She came to my room to see me and she and I caught up on the news. While we were gossiping, the topic of Ratna cropped up.

'Ratna was seriously ill,' Mother said. 'On Friday last, she was sent to Pune in a special taxi, but it was no use. Yesterday they brought her back dead in another taxi, reduced to a skeleton. The whole village assembled for her funeral. Many people wept. She was really a lovable child.' Saying this, Mother broke down. She remembered many nice things about the girl, such as her generosity in giving away leftovers, condiments, vegetables and the like. She got extremely





emotional and started sobbing uncontrollably, as if she had lost a close relative. I could not hold back my tears, either, remembering the days when I had seen Ratna playing around. But why was nobody prepared to marry her? In our community, women did marry twice, even thrice. If a woman was abandoned by her first husband, she could take a second one. If she wanted to leave her second husband, she could even go back to her first husband if she so desired.

Mother explained, 'We are low-caste nomads. These things are a way of life for us, but not for them. For them, a woman's honour is as delicate as glassware.'

On one particular auspicious day, many marriages were to take place. Father had taken only one contract. There was also a competing band from Surwadi, so we rehearsed continuously. The wedding was to take place at Sakarwadi. As we would be playing in a city, we had to prepare at least four or five songs very well.

The people of the neighbourhood shouted at us for the disturbance created by our endless rehearsals. 'You heartless guys! Let us at least rest at night! You're creating such a nuisance. You give us a headache.'

But there were some who would come just to listen to our music.

Everything was ready, and we went to Sakarwadi. We played during the entire wedding ceremony. I played the drum rhythmically, putting my heart and soul into it. We played film songs. We accompanied the bridegroom in procession. The groom stood in ceremonial attire in front of the temple of Maruti, and at that moment we reached the crescendo. While I played, however, my eyes fell on the first floor of the house opposite, and suddenly I lost the rhythm. All my attention was concentrated on the first floor of that house—she was the same girl, the one who had had to leave Phaltan because of her father's transfer. I could not concentrate on the job at hand. I started playing out of tune. In front of us was another band.

Father was playing the flat drum, known as the *padgham*, next to me, and as I missed rhythm after rhythm, he gave me a kick right on my bottom in full view of the gathering. 'What nonsense are you playing?' he yelled. He raised his leg to give me another kick, but Appa appeased him somehow. My prestige had suffered irreparable





damage. On the first floor, the girl was giggling heartily and I, coming back to my senses, started playing carefully.

The song was over. Father was livid. He ordered me: ‘Concentrate on the drum and play sensibly, at least during the bridal procession. Don’t force me to say that your poor mother be screwed!’ I was dying of embarrassment. After that I didn’t look up even once.

For the evening procession, I played well. In fact, I surpassed myself. The bandmaster who was playing opposite us complimented me. Father’s chest swelled with pride. My eyes wandered everywhere and saw that none of my classmates had come to attend the wedding.

Translated by A. K. Kamat

Bhasha



From *Tanda*, by Atmaram Rathod

The Camp

During the year 1963-64, a new crop of leaders began to mushroom in the Yavatmal district. There was a veritable leadership wave. Upstarts—among whom were vagabonds, beggars, bankrupts, cheats and scheming scoundrels—began to masquerade as political leaders, with their conspicuous khadi and hand-woven robes, and joined the political bandwagon. Politicians made a show of their doors being open to this new breed of political worker. They gave them some leeway but kept them on a leash; anybody found to be crossing his limits was promptly dealt with, his wings clipped in his own village or town by the politician giving a boost to his adversary.

Failure to clear the seventh-standard examination thrice in Warandali district did not dampen my spirits. I decided to pursue my studies for the fourth time.

There was no change in the living conditions at the hostel, which disturbed me. I shifted to the house of my cousin's in-laws in a nearby village. My cousin's father-in-law was also the follower of Mai's guru, so I established a quick rapport with him. I used to help him in his preparation for morning worship. To the delight of my uncle, we would take our evening meals together after I came back from school. My spirits lifted after once again following the teachings of Sevadas Maharaj. I had a fine time.

But this happiness did not last long. After the Dassara festival I came back to my tanda. Baa and Yaa were glad that I had decided to stay with my uncle instead of at the hostel. They had hoped this would help me to reach matriculation level. But suddenly I was devastated by a mishap.





As usual, I had gone to the farm early in the morning. I had lighted a fire and was warming myself while at the same time shooing away the flocks of birds. All of a sudden my father appeared on the scene. I thought he had come to see whether I was keeping a proper vigil, but to my utter astonishment, he put his hand on his head and I saw tears rolling down his cheeks.

In a choked voice he said, 'Dina, whatever I nurtured and expended was for the benefit of you children. I bought this farm out of my own earnings. I am emotionally attached to it. I cremated my father here, and it has been my endeavour to save the farm from being sold. After me, you alone can take care of it. If the farm is lost, the children of Moto, and for that matter the entire family, will be thrown out on the streets. The farm cannot be left to the care of the servants.'

I was nonplussed by Baa's impassioned entreaties. I thought I had no choice but to take the mantle thrust upon me by my father. I began to give much of my time and attention to looking after farming activities.

We had a servant called Kalu, who had worked for us for many years and was considered very reliable. When he got married, however, he began to take fruits and grains from the farm on the sly. When Baa learnt about this he realized the farm could not be left to the care of the servants. For this reason he begged me to abandon my education, and I acceded to his request.

Kalu was our favourite servant. There was no reason to doubt his honesty and integrity. He might have been prompted to commit minor thefts out of his love for his wife, and I did not think anything wrong in that. But my parents could not reconcile themselves to the thought that a person upon whom the entire family depended should take to thieving.

Although I had to stop pursuing my education, I still did not forsake the idea of going on for higher education. When I would go to the field in the morning, I would take a few jowar chapatis and stuff my pockets with jaggery. My pockets would be smeared and stiffened with jaggery. My sister-in-law would accuse me of stealing jaggery from the house and would raise a hue and cry.





In an ashram in Vitthala, there were several religious books. My uncle would take me to the ashram. I had a strong urge to write devotional poems and stories, but beyond this I had no clear idea of what I wanted to write about Sevadas Maharaj. It was sometime during this period that my pursuit of a literary work on him began.

In addition to jowar chapatis and jaggery, I used to carry a notebook to the field rather stealthily. Because my father did not like my urge to write, he would accuse me of not pursuing my studies sincerely, but rather indulging in the unproductive activity of writing poetry or stories. My father thought of me as a worthless fellow, not capable of earning my bread. This impression hurt me.

Although Baa himself had asked me to look after our agricultural work and stop going to school, I was pained at his ridicule. Even if I was physically at the farm, my heart was in school. I was happy to help Baa when he was in distress, but I was not someone who could do anything at his behest. I was not like the mythological Ram, who was supposed to have renounced his kingdom and spent fourteen years in the wilderness at the wish of his father. I was an ordinary humble person. Like any young man, I had my own dreams. At times I even felt like renouncing the security of my home, finding a solution to the agony of life, establishing a new religion, being a Buddha. But that would have meant forsaking my family, my wife and offspring. At other times I wanted to be a world conqueror as mighty as Alexander the Great. I dreamt of raising an army from among the young boys of the tanda, of achieving immortality and a place in the pantheon of stars like that of the mythological Dhruv.

These thoughts made me uneasy. They created a sense of diffidence in me. I spent the year in such a frame of mind. Baa would get irritated with or without provocation, and would call me the choicest epithets. There was no end to my sister-in-law's dislike for me, either. In such circumstances I would take refuge at the *samadhi* of Sevadas. I travelled the distance on foot, as I had no money to buy a bus ticket. The twenty-five-mile road to Pohra passed through a dense forest, but so strong was my urge to be at the feet of Sevadas Maharaj and Goddess Jagdamba to find succour that I was not afraid to go alone through the jungle without telling my family.





Recently, when Babu and I were riding a mobike, Babu was afraid to take the jungle road. I tried to drive away the fear from his mind, but I confessed that I was also terrified. I relayed to him the adventures of my younger days, when I used to walk alone on the same forest road only a few years earlier.

It was sometime during the year 1971-72; I do not remember the exact time. But the atmosphere was hot with political activity on the eve of the general election. Vasantao Naik was seeking election from the Pusad constituency and was certain to win. I was touring the Mangrul, Pusad, Lonar, Akola and Washim constituencies with Sanawatji. I was everything for Sanawatji—an unpaid personal attendant, an errand boy and a peon.

One day we reached Pusad in the morning. We met Babasahib and briefed him on our electoral tour. Babasahib said, 'You have quite a lot of territory to cover. Now concentrate on the Pusad constituency for a few days.'

I don't know why, but there was a sudden change in Sanawatji's approach. I knew he wanted to spend a few days in Pusad, yet he shot back, 'No, no, this will not be possible for me. How can we rest at this time? I am the poor man's poor, humble leader.'

'But we need your services here...'

'Maybe! But I do not belong to one constituency alone. My community is waiting for me. My country beckons me.'

There was an exchange of hot words between the two big shot leaders of the community. Neither was prepared to climb down from his position. I watched the exchange between the two senior leaders with amusement. At last Sanawatji got up and walked away. I followed him mutely, carrying his luggage in both hands.

After we had walked some distance, a jeep arrived. 'Babasahib has called you,' the driver said to Sanawatji.

'Tell him I'm not coming,' Sanawatji roared.

The driver pleaded that if he went on without taking Sanawatji, he would be beaten up by the master. 'Save me from his wrath.' We





returned to Babasahib's bungalow in the jeep.

'Where are you going?' Babasahib asked.

'Vijapur,' replied Sanawatji.

'Then take the jeep,'

'No, we'll board a bus.'

Both of them went inside. After a while I was called in. Sanawatji said, 'Atmaram, I do not drink even water at a candidate's place. Take this money for travel, I will not touch it.'

Isn't this a joke? We left Babasahib's bungalow with my pockets stuffed with ten thousand rupees. We went to Vijapur, from where K.T. Rathod was seeking election.

Rathod was not at home. His wife, a woman with a sense of hospitality, came out with water and tea. Sanawatji flared up at this, 'Atmaram! Didn't you tell the woman?'

'What?' I inquired in a surprised tone.

'That I do not partake of food or water at an election candidate's place. Although K.T. is my close friend, he is fighting the election on a party ticket and I do not subscribe to any party. I am a man of independent policy. I am campaigning in the election because I have some similarities with the policies of the Indira Congress.'

In what words should I describe the woman's discomfiture? She was in tears, seeing that a noted social worker like Sanawatji refused even to drink water at her house. At last a compromise was struck. I would take meals at K.T.'s house as Sanawatji's representative, and Sanawatji himself would put up in a posh hotel. K.T.'s campaign chief was drafted into Sanawatji's service. He informed us that a hall had been booked in the hotel for Sanawatji to address the campaign workers.

Sanawatji retired to his room for rest. I spent my free time visiting the Upali fortress and the famous Mulkh-e-Maidan gun. At that time I did not know that in the future one of my poems would be named after it. (During the Asmitadarh meet somebody, possibly Keshao Meshram, gave this title to my poem.) I roamed around the historic places there. I am fond of exploring and seeing new places.

When I first visited my wife's tanda, I preferred to spend my time





on the hillock.

You may say, 'What's so great about that? We have seen the Eiffel Tower, Niagara Falls, the Taj Mahal, the Apollo spacecraft and such other historical and modern wonders, and studied them as well.'

But those for whom I am writing this do not know anything. When the people of the tanda saw the smoke emanating from the rocket, they thought it was some celestial occurrence. I know that continuity in research was the hallmark of the success of the space mission. But the same continuity was not followed in tanda education. You fed the backward people of the tanda information about the electoral symbols of parties and candidates and reaped a rich harvest on their naivety. You amassed wealth on the strength of their votes.

When I went to the hotel, most of the prominent Congress leaders of Vijapur had assembled in large numbers. They took care not to disturb Sanawatji in his sleep. They asked me to awaken Sanawatji, but I refused. I asked them to assemble in the meeting hall.

One of the workers asked me, 'When will Sahib take his meals?'

'I can't say. It depends on his mood.'

'What will he have?'

'A full chicken, curd, four *parathas*, rice—everything should be special,' I told him.

I gave him the menu just as the *pujari* used to give my mother the list of things required to perform the Satyanarayan ritual. She would follow his instructions with all devotion. With the same devotion, the party worker assured me, 'Don't worry. Everything will be extra-special.'

It seemed that Ketibhiya's wife had told her husband about her encounter with Sanawatji. Ketibhiya was Karnataka's fisheries minister and had once been president of the Karnataka Pradesh Congress Committee. Whenever he wrote to Sanawatji, he addressed him as 'Honourable Sanawatji'.

The meeting began around 8.30 at night. The waiter brought Sanawatji's dinner around 9.15. The faces of the nearly seventy people present brightened at the aroma of the rich food.





The cunning Sanawatji quickly read the crowd's mood. He thundered, 'What is this?'

'Your dinner, Sir,' somebody said in a meek voice.

'What is the menu?' Sanawatji asked, his eyebrows raised.

One of the workers spelled out the menu as I had instructed, with the hope that seeing his favourite dishes served would make the old man happy.

'Who told you to prepare such rich food?' he asked in a high-pitched tone.

When the worker cast a glance at me, I simply looked the other way. Somebody tried to mollify the enraged old man. 'Ketibhiya told us to make proper arrangements for you, so we wanted to serve you the best possible dinner...'

'I know,' he said with a sense of inflated pride, 'that Ketu is my disciple, and therefore I managed to get the election ticket for him. I have been successful in quelling chaos in Naik Sahib's Congress party. You can ask Atmaram. But I was so eager to meet you. Remember, I am a poor worker from a poor class in society. How can I eat such rich food? Bring some bhel for me.'

'But what to do with this food? We may have erred, but please partake of the food.'

'No! No! Impossible. Bring some bhel for me.'

'And what about this food?'

'You need not worry about that. I'll give it to some poor man.' The crowd was wonder-struck by the big-heartedness of this poor leader of poor people. The leader, who had spent his entire life wearing only a dhoti and was supposed to be the godfather of industrial tycoons, must have similarly mesmerised millions of people in this country!

The meeting concluded at 12.00 midnight. Everyone left. Sanawatji ate the entire chicken and the rest of the rich food, leaving only a few morsels for me.





When I returned to Pusad it was time for both Holi and the naming ceremony of Moto's second son. It was customary in the tanda that, regardless of when the child was born, the naming ceremony was performed on Holi. Besides, I was very fond of playing Holi, the festival of colours.

Balu met Sanawatji and asked him to send me to the tanda. 'I do not imprison myself in the traditions of the community,' Sanawatji said. 'Atmaram is my assistant. Where is the need for him to follow old and backward traditions like Holi and Diwali? I will not allow him to do so, and I will not send him either.'

Balu was disappointed. Later he whispered in my ear, '*Aatu*, without you, what is the charm in the Holi celebrations? We will cancel the naming ceremony.'

'No! No! Don't cancel the festivities. I will come but on the day of Holi,' I promised him.

'Will this old hack allow you to go?' he asked.

'Yes, definitely. You take care of other things,' I told him firmly.

By the time we returned to Sanawatji's house it was night-time. We immediately went to sleep.

I was awakened by Sanawatji's elder daughter, Neeta, the next morning. She had fallen in love with Sohan, who worked in her father's office in Delhi. She used to write him very emotional letters. She would never forget to write the two words 'eternal hope'. Sohan himself would show me her letters. I used to get restless after reading them.

When I met Neeta for the first time she asked me, 'Bhaiya, do you have ten rupees? I have to buy sugar.' It was her father's money, but I promptly gave it to her.

After taking tea, I went to Sanawatji's room. I used to take dictation of his letters. 'I am a man of independent disposition. But being a like-minded party, if you want me to work for you in the election, let the invitation come from the State Congress or you can chalk out a





tour programme for me and send a copy to the State Congress,' he would write to Congress leaders.

Slowly the people from Kateumari Tanda began to gather around Sanawatji. He had accustomed the people of his tanda to lingering around him. He had another habit as well: he was very fond of writing letters and preparing files. He had piles of files. If he visited Kateumari he would send messages to at least a hundred people about his impending visit. At least fifty of them were certain to turn up at their own expense to seek his guidance. How fortunate this small place Kateumari is! The global headquarters of 'Vishwa Banjara Mahasangh' is located there, with branches in Delhi, Bombay, Pondicherry and New York. You can see Sanawatji's letter pad for confirmation.

One day people were gathering in his office and I was putting the finishing touches on a letter when Sanawatji suddenly roared, 'Atmaram!'

'Yes, what's the matter?' I inquired in a frightened tone.

'You have not submitted yesterday's account.'

'It's ready. I'll give it to you right now.'

'You shouldn't have to be reminded everyday. If you do not fulfil your responsibilities on your own, it gives rise to suspicion.'

I was taken aback by this sudden attack on my character. I put before him the account and the cash. He perused the account and said, 'Atmaram! The balance amount shows a shortage of ten rupees.'

'I gave it to Neeta-tai,' I told him.

'Gave the money to Neeta?' he thundered. 'Was it your money? My money? Does it not belong to the community? Who is Neeta?'

What could I say? I was on a mission of social service. In those days it was beyond me to understand how a community that had slogged away serving others for generations could suddenly turn so lazy. Or had the elites taken upon themselves the task of serving these deprived masses? It was a strange turn of events. Was there a certain cunning in diluting commercialism into Samyayoga?

'With whose permission did you give the money?' Sanawatji thundered again.





‘I wanted to ask you but you were sleeping,’ I explained.

‘I was sleeping? Maybe; if you’re going to toil for social welfare, you also need some rest. But the society to whom this money belongs had not gone to sleep.’

I could no longer tolerate his hypocritical sermons, especially when he was trying to humiliate me in front of my acquaintances.

I retorted, ‘Neeta said there was no sugar in the house for your tea.’

‘In the house? Whose house?’ he roared angrily. I was puzzled by his posturing. He continued in the same moral vein. ‘This house does not belong to me. It may belong to Neeta or her mother, but my home is my society, I am only a guest in this house, and a guest never makes arrangements for his tea in other people’s houses. Understood? You don’t understand me...nobody does. I have been toiling for the upliftment of the deprived masses and you people are putting a damper on my efforts. It is for this reason that I want a Mahadev. A Mahadevbhai Desai.’

My God! Sanawatji was going to be another Gandhi! And he said that society is awake! But if society is awake, it does not allow parasites to dominate. Because even the gamblers’ eyes open after they have gone through the rigours of *vanvasa* and are prepared to fight back. And ours is only a mass of humanity toiling for a loaf of bread. What will happen if this exploited society awakens? But what a pity that there is no one to provide them the basic needs of shelter, food and clothing. Then why do you talk of Samyayoga, you fools? The time has not come yet.

Sanawatji continued his lecture. ‘Call Neeta,’ he said.

‘Here? Into the meeting?’ I asked in a trembling voice.

‘Yes,’ he said firmly.

‘Let go,’ somebody from the audience said in a quivering tone. ‘Why blame Neeta-tai or anybody else? We’ll collect donations from the people and pay you a hundred rupees to compensate for the tea. Will that be all right?’

Silence descended on the hall. With his head cast downward, Sanawatji was watching everyone’s reaction in the hall from the





corner of his eye and listening to the amount of each person's donation. Within minutes Rs 400 had been collected. Some people had pledged donations on credit, but they were certain to pay later.

The incident had no effect on Sanawatji's household. But later Neeta caught hold of me in private and said, 'Bhaiya, because of me you had to suffer insult. Please forgive me.'

'You are Sohan's friend. So forget about the episode,' I said teasingly. 'But you made a mistake.'

'Mistake?' she said, surprised.

'You called me Bhaiya and became my sister. That means that Sohan will be my brother-in-law.'

In fact, I was delighted to have Neeta as my sister. Although her complexion was brownish, she had a lovely face. We developed a close friendship with the passage of time.

A jeep came in the evening. I sat in the vehicle and waited for Sanawatji to get in. Somebody told me he was calling me. The people of Kateumari had gathered around the jeep to bid him goodbye. I went to the conference room through the western entrance. Sanawatji was standing at the eastern entrance and beckoned me to follow him. We walked out into the courtyard and Sanawatji closed the door to the hall for privacy. Thanks to the thick, bushy creepers, nobody would know what was going on in the courtyard. Neeta was there. Sanawatji seemed ashamed of what had happened earlier.

He asked apologetically, 'Do you have fifteen hundred rupees?' I was bewildered. I merely nodded to say yes. 'Neeta has to be sent to Nagpur for her examination. Please give me fifteen hundred rupees for the time being.'

I didn't bother to count fifteen hundred-rupee notes. I handed over all the cash I had with me. I don't know how much he gave to Neeta!

The people waiting outside thought we were being scolded for giving ten rupees to Neeta. There was an air of uneasiness in the crowd.

We reached Digras and spent the night there. The next day I firmly told Sanawatji that I was going back home. Even then he





lectured me: 'We are the poor servants of a poor society. Rituals, festivals, family have no place in our lives. Society beckons us.' But seeing my firm resolve, he allowed me to go just for a day. I returned to the tanda and played Holi to my heart's content, dancing with my friends in gay abandon. I was in no mood to return to Sanawatji, and although all my belongings were in his house, I stayed back at home.

Whenever I returned to Moha, my tanda, my starvation began anew. Rati would get annoyed that I was so careless about my job.

'Why have you come back?' she would ask, irritated.

'I just felt like coming back home.'

'Nobody would be so careless about his job.'

'I would forsake everything for you. Even sacrifice my life.'

But she would not listen. She would stop talking to me. I had only one weapon to make her talk again—I would write poems and recite them to her. The words in the poems would bring a pleasing smile to her face, and her big eyes would sparkle with mesmerizing emotions. These moments were lifelong treasure for me. I thought we were born for each other. But I did not know then that nobody is born for anybody or lives for any other person. When I wrote those poems I did not have the maturity to understand life's harsh realities. I admit now that I was naïve to assume that somebody was born for me, or that I was born for the person I loved.

I completed the biography of Sevadas and sent the manuscript to the Sahitya-Sanskriti Mandal, a literary organization, for publication. I then had to wait for the verdict. What should I do in the meantime? I decided to learn the reaction of the people of the tanda to the book.

Gulab Rupchand Rathod was a student at a Pusad college. He was fond of writing poems in the Banjara dialect, and he published them as well. I developed a friendship with him. We decided to recite my Sevadas biography in his tanda.

Gulab was a resident of Talegaon (Deshmukh) in Darwha taluka. The villagers and the tanda were very fond of organizing religious discourses. In those days my favourite outfit consisted of a dhoti, a





Nehru *kurta* and a *pancha* on my shoulders.

Every day I would hold a discourse from 7 to 10 p.m. covering two chapters. At first I was not sure whether those who came on the first day would come back, but I was surprised to see people actually come in greater numbers on the second day. I felt reassured.

On the morning of the fourth day I was sitting alone at the place where I delivered my discourses. A man about forty years old came to me and put his head on my feet. 'Maharaja, O saint! Please bless me,' he pleaded.

'Who am I to bless you? Sevadas alone can bless you.' I uttered only these words.

The next day the man brought me several gifts and fruits from Darwha. He took me to his house, offered me milk and fruit, presented the gifts and bowed before me devoutly. I was at a loss to understand what was going on. He said, 'Maharaja, your blessing has done me a world of good. But it was my misfortune that I did not understand your message. Tell me only once again, O saint!' And he clutched my feet.

I pushed him aside in a bid to free my legs from his grip. 'What do you want?' I asked him.

'Why do you ask me, Maharaja? Whether anybody has understood your power or not, I have recognized you. Yesterday you said that if Sevadas is pleased, he will bless you not just with four hands but with eight hands. Not everybody understands the language of the saints, their hidden message. I have understood your message. I put a bet on the numbers four and eight and I was rewarded with a booty of three thousand rupees. Tell me only once. Only one figure...' he pleaded passionately.

I was taken aback by this. I had traded in dangerous territory, I was bewildered and surprised that a saint who was born 150 years ago could oblige his followers in this manner and make a saint out of me! I thought that if just one miracle like this took place after every discourse, I would be flooded with invitations to hold discourses. I was almost in a trance, and in that state I said to this man, 'Sevadas will bless you.'





Before I could say anything further, a beautiful eighteen-year-old girl came before me. She used to attend my discourses regularly and stare directly into my eyes.

Her simple, naive brother said, 'Maharaj, please read her palm and tell me whether she will get a good husband.' She placed her palm in my hand. I had studied some palmistry, and I also knew how the fake sadhus, fakirs and the likes of them used to cheat my mother when telling her fortune. I was aware of their preposterous pretensions and their ability to look convincing to the gullible. My mind wavered. I took the girl's palm in my hand. What a beautiful palm it was! It was difficult to find girls with such beautiful hands in the tando. Because of the hard work they had to do day in and day out, their hands acquired stony hardness. How could any of their hands be as soft as petals? There's an exception to every rule, and this girl seemed an example of that.

My sight was transfixed by her transparent-looking white hand. I looked at the beautiful hand unblinkingly and started telling the girl's fortune. I promised her a bright future and told her about the pitfalls and setbacks likely to occur. I assured her brother that she would be married to a nice boy. The brother listened to my predictions with rapt attention and complete faith. In return I was invited for dinner but I refused the invitation.

My discourses ended with a dinner for the entire tando. Just as I was about to leave Gulab's tando, some people came with a marriage proposal for the beautiful girl. As a result I was given a warm and affectionate send-off. I began to understand how gullible people can be; you can take them for a ride by playing on their emotions.

I had to go from Moha to Pusad. There was a bus from Warud to Pusad, with tickets for just thirty-five paise. But I could not afford even this meagre amount at that time. I used to go out after tea and eat some snacks in the hotel if somebody offered them; otherwise I had to do without.

I used to visit Rati's house at the appointed time; and she would offer me a few chapatis. I expressed satisfaction with whatever little she offered, though it was hardly enough to fill my hungry belly.





She would ask, 'Why do you eat so little?'

I would lie to her. 'I already had my meal at home.'

'Will you swear in the name of God?'

'No, no! I won't swear in the name of God.'

'Who served you a meal so early?'

'My elder sister-in-law.'

'Are you telling the truth?'

'Are you mad? My elder sister-in-law loves me like her son. How can she allow me to go without food? Tell me!'

I lied to Rati about my sister-in-law's affection for me. That was the only thing I lied to her about.

I was uneasy on my journey from Moha. It was my habit to conceive new poems or sing folk songs while walking alone; I would go into a trance, and perhaps in that state I unwittingly raised my voice. I was reciting a song in praise of Sevasdas. Somewhere on the road from Warnad to Pusad, near the agricultural field of Advocate Kutumbe, two men stopped to listen to my song. They may have thought I was an *auliya* or a *sadhu*. They said, 'O saint! Please bless us!' I was not perturbed by this; by now I had learnt that matka gamblers are always on the lookout for *fakirs* and *sadhus*—for fortunate figures that will help them win their games. I had tried my hand at matka gambling on quite a few occasions, but I was still a novice at the game of cards.

The two men eagerly waited for words to spill out of my mouth. I took my only four-anna coin out of my pocket and gave it to them. I told them, 'I found this coin near the pole where a sheep was tied.' I do not know what figure they conjured up and bet, but after three or four days I saw them standing in the same spot. I escaped.

I went to Pohra and read out the Sevasdas biography to the mahant there. His response was lacklustre and discouraging. He said, 'You are a family man. What are you going to achieve by writing a book on this saint's life? Take four or five thousand rupees from me and forget you ever wrote the book.'





I told the mahant that I would not take a farthing less than forty thousand rupees, and came back to Pusad. I told Sir what had transpired at Pohra and asked him what I should do.

‘What is your opinion?’ he asked me.

‘I should not give the mahant my book.’

‘Absolutely right. I need not tell you anything further.’

Things were happening rather dramatically. But worries about my livelihood continued to haunt me. Everybody assured me that once the book was in the market, it would sell like hot cakes. I, too, was sure the book would sell without much difficulty. But I needed money to get it published. An MLA from Digras, Ramrao Patil, who was a devotee of Sevadas, donated five hundred rupees, and I got a grant from the Sahitya Sanskriti Mandal during the Ramnavami fair at Pohra in 1973.

Eventually, I opened a shop to sell the Sevadas biography. Around five lakh people gathered at the Ramnavami Fair in Pohra—people came from Madhya Pradesh, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka and Maharashtra. I was expecting all eleven hundred copies to sell out. But before my book was published the mahants got another Sevadas biography written by somebody from a village near Washim, and released it in the market. The mahants were wily enough not to print the price on the book.

It was an old tradition that the mahant would visit various tandas after the festival of Makar Sankranti in the month of January. Every tanda, depending on its financial status, would collect a fund, present it to the mahant and hold a feast for the entire tanda in his honour. A red carpet was unrolled to welcome him.

Everybody wanted the mahant to visit his house and oblige the family with his blessings, but he could visit only a couple of houses. Everyone in the family would bow their heads at his feet in reverence, and the head of the family would fold his hands and say, ‘Swamiji, please accept a donation of 2,501 rupees for the construction of the temple, and bless my family.’ The swami would then place the Sevadas book in his hands.

Overwhelmed by the generosity of the mahant, the host would





ask, 'What is the price of the book?'

'How dare you ask the price of my blessings?'

Ashamed, the host would say apologetically, 'I'm sorry for committing such a grave mistake. We are simple people, prone to committing such mistakes. Please pardon us.'

'That's what I'm saying. The price of my blessings is eleven hundred rupees!'

And the exploitation went on. Yet people made a beeline to buy my book. What were the reasons? Being in poetic form, it was definitely a better book than the other. But the tanda did not know the value of the poetry; what appealed to them was the realism of my story. I had taken great pains, had wandered from place to place to gather authentic information. Another attraction was the *ladi geet*, a form of folk poetry that had almost become extinct. I believe it was the revival of the *ladi geet* that attracted people to my book. I sold more than two hundred copies in no time.

But suddenly my shop was attacked, and I had to wind up my business and return home. The next year the organizers refused to give me permission to open my bookstall, and paid no heed to my pleadings. At last I opened my stall outside the fair, sharing the place with two cobblers.

Now it was the summer of 1974. For the last few years my efforts to get married had not borne fruit. Sometimes either I or the girl rejected the match, and sometimes it was because of my unemployment. My father was a shrewd man; he knew that I did not want to marry any particular girl. But he was also worried that his reputation would be sullied if he agreed to a match and then, because of my own lack of interest, had to go back on his word.

Coincidentally, Balu's marriage was also settled. Baa mortgaged the remaining four-acre piece of land to raise money. I decided to flee home, but somebody broke the news of my plan to my family so I had to drop it. At last I agreed to get married, on the condition that I do so in a mass marriage ceremony. Because of this precondition, my marriage was postponed for three years, as Yashoda's orthodox parents were not prepared to marry their daughter off at any place other than





their own house.

I thought that my precondition would help me ward off marriage, but I could not avoid it for long. On May 25, 1974, I got married. How could I enjoy the pleasures of marriage in the absence of any gainful employment? However, Yashoda was least concerned about my financial status. Her world was restricted to toiling day in and day out, eating sumptuously and sleeping without any worries nagging her. I got annoyed with her attitude. She was always attached to my mother's apron strings, even assisting her with farm labour.

I admit that I could never understand her. She would put a damper on my efforts to educate her. She was more interested in agricultural activities—in the livestock and the standing crops— than I was. I grew despondent. How could I interest her in education? I was not going to abandon her because of her illiteracy, yet I wanted to make her aware of the injustice meted out to her. I was helpless. She would never respond to my entreaties. I was disgusted by her stony attitude.

Sometime around the month of August I went to Yavatmal and booked a room in a lodge where Sanawatji usually put up. I was there to meet Sudhakar Rao Naik—he was president of the Yavatmal Jilla Parishad and I had met him in connection with somebody's work. The meeting was fixed for the morning.

After seeing the last film show I returned to my hotel room late at night. Around 2 a.m. somebody slapped me hard on the back. I knew it was Sanawatji. I was puzzled by his presence there—the poor 'monarch' of the poor was standing in front of me. He looked somewhat different. 'Try as I might to avoid him and keep him at bay,' I thought, 'he continues to hound me.' I stared blankly at him.

He broke the silence. 'When I heard you were putting up in this lodge, I left my room and came to stay with you. We have to get up early in the morning. We have so much work to do.'

Sanawatji went to sleep but I stayed awake. How could I sleep? Questions started cropping up in my mind. What sort of work did he have?





‘Why are you here?’ Sanawatji asked me the next morning.

‘I have some work with Sudhakar Babu,’ I said.

‘Is the work finished?’

‘No, not yet.’

‘It will be done. But you have to come to Delhi with me.’

I was pleased by the prospect of going to Delhi and seeing the historic Red Fort, where Bahadurshah Jaffar had penned his famous *ghazals*, where the *jawans* of Azad Hind Sena were tried and on whose ramparts the tricolour was first hoisted when India gained independence. I longed to see that historic monument. I was in a happy, childlike frame of mind—as if I’d got a new toy. I wanted to get a teacher transferred through the good offices of Sudhakar Rao. I had taken three hundred rupees for travel expenses and had spent the entire amount. But the attraction for Delhi was so strong that I forgot about the work and went to Delhi.

We despatched several telegrams from Nagpur. Sanawatji may also have sent letters. We reached Delhi, and the next day volunteers started gathering. Sanawatji’s office was in an MP’s government bungalow. Since I had not brought any clothes, new clothes were purchased for me.

As workers and volunteers started gathering, we despatched letters to the president of India, the prime minister and Yashwantrao Chavan asking for appointments and waited for a favourable response. Workers continued to pour in, one of them being Nemichand, bald yet with close-cropped hair on the sides, a fair complexion and bright, shining eyes. He was a tall young man and wore clean neat clothes. He came around 7.30 in the morning and went straight to Sanawatji’s bedroom to pay him respect. At the same time Sanawatji called me for dictation. Nemichand took the pad from me and said, ‘What will I do? You can handle some other work and leave the dictation to me.’

I glanced at Sanawatji. He gave his usual smile.

So Nemichand started taking care of Sanawatji’s every need. He brought him tea and betel leaves, prepared his paan, ordered his meals and stood at hand while he took his meals, gave him massages, and washed his clothes. He single-handedly did the work of ten





people. Coincidentally—or perhaps it was arranged by Sanawatji—our appointment with the prime minister, Mrs Indira Gandhi, was fixed. After that it was a meeting with Yashwantrao Chavan, and later in the evening a meeting with President Mr. V. V. Giri, all in a single day. If Sanawatji claimed this was due to his influence that these important meetings could be arranged, his followers were bound to be awed by their leader's standing in the higher echelons. Nemichand always gave the impression that he would prostrate before Sanawatji in reverence.

On the day of our meeting with the prime minister, crowds began surging early in the morning and everybody, including myself, was busy getting ready for the big occasion. Nemichand was more worried about Sanawatji's preparation than his own. He somehow managed to get ready in time. All of us went down to the ground floor. Sanawatji was despatching his workers to the prime minister's house in taxis and auto-rickshaws; eventually only four or five principal aides remained, and two taxis waited for them. At last Nemichand came and got into the taxi that was to take Sanawatji to the prime minister's house.

When the taxis reached 1 Safdarjung Road, Sanawatji looked at me and asked who was going to pay the taxi fare. I looked around. Nemichand had already paid the bill. About a hundred workers were waiting for Sanawatji with stony faces. Sanawatji asked, 'Where are the garlands? Who is going to bring them?' Before anyone could even react, Nemichand got into a taxi and went to get the garlands.

Soon after the meeting with the prime minister was over, we went straight to Chavan Sahib's house. Here also Nemichand paid for the taxi, as if he had decided to pay Sanawatji's every bill.

In the evening we set off for the Rashtrapati Bhavan. It was a short distance away from North Avenue and could easily be covered on foot. But according to Sanawatji, nobody could go on foot to the Rashtrapati Bhavan. I doubted his words.

'Where are the garlands?' Sanawatji demanded immediately after we reached the security gates. Nemichand turned back to get the garlands. 'Atmaram, we are going to meet the president of this country.





The garland should be commensurate with his high status, not like the niggardly one brought this morning.’ Nemichand stopped in his tracks. ‘Who brought that garland this morning?’

The president arrived. We met him. But what were we going to talk about, and who was going to talk? The president did not understand Hindi, and Sanawatji did not know English. At last Advocate Shivajirao Moghe spoke to the president. The president walked away from the meeting. We thought we would be served *sherbet*. Somebody came from the president’s secretariat and asked us politely to give him a memorandum, if we had any. Everybody was at his wit’s end, as it turned out that Nemichand had left the papers at his apartment. Sanawatji looked at me with profound rage, but I pointed to Nemichand and said I had had nothing to do with the papers.

As we stepped out of the Rashtrapati Bhavan, Sanawatji said, ‘Let us go to Maharashtra Sadan. Uncle Vasantao Naik has come.’

Even there, Sanawatji started acting smart. He began to tell Naikji how he had met leaders, ministers and prime ministers, about the discussions he had held with them and the representations he had submitted to them.

‘All this! What for?’ Naik Sahib asked him.

Sanawatji smiled and said, ‘The sixth conference of our community is to be held in Kanpur.’

‘But Uncle, we have not even held the fifth conference,’ I innocently blurted.

‘Shut up!’ Sanawatji shot back in anger.

Vasantao intervened and changed the subject. He agreed to help organize the conference and inquired after everybody’s welfare.

Soon after we came out of Maharashtra Sadan, Sanawatji, now livid with anger, shouted at me, ‘I told you to keep your mouth shut, especially when you don’t know what to say and where to say it. How can the community make progress when people like you behave in such a stupid way?’

I cast my head down. But I was happy in my heart that I had had the satisfaction of exposing the humbug!





After our brief encounter with Naik Sahib, the volunteers were eager to return home and began to prepare for their return journey. Nemichand came to me and asked, 'All are going?'

'Yes. If you want, you can go, too,' I said.

'No, I will not go. I will stay with Sanawatji and serve him. But what about the money I have spent?'

'Money? What money?' I asked. I was bewildered, but also pained at the thought that one more gullible, naive person was falling into Sanawatji's dragnet. I thought of alerting him but he interrupted my thoughts. 'I bought the garlands for the president and the prime minister with my own money.'

'How much did you spend?' I started to feel sorry for him.

'One hundred sixty-five rupees!'

'So much?'

'Yes. Was Sanawatji annoyed at the quality of the garland for the prime minister? I bought the president a garland costing one hundred and ten rupees. Didn't he find it beautiful?' he asked.

Piqued by my silence, he said in a disturbed tone, 'Not only a hundred sixty-five. I have spent over three hundred rupees. Have I not been paying Sanawatji's taxi bills? Besides, I have also been footing his bills for meals, refreshments and tea. All this amounts to...'

'Have you left any money for your journey back home?' I pitied him but at the same time also felt disgusted with him.

'No, I have nothing left. But why do I need money? I am not going back home. This was just for your information.'

How angry could I be with him? There was a time when, like Nemichand, I was also eager to be close to Sanawatji. Still, I felt something should be done for Nemichand. I was not inclined to tell him about my bitter experiences with Sanawatji. I entered Sanawatji's room. He was speaking to his workers.

'Nemichand wants...' I stammered.

'Does he want to go? Let him go. But ask him to come and see me before he goes,' he said.





‘No, he has no money...’ I muttered.

‘Has he lost the money or was his pocket picked?’

‘No. He spent one hundred sixty-five rupees on garlands and over three hundred rupees on taxi bills.’ I managed to utter those words in one breath.

‘He bought garlands? Who told him to buy the garlands?’ He stared at me with anger writ large on his face. How could I say that I did not know who had asked him to bring the garlands? There was a pin-drop silence in the room.

‘He says he has no money left for his return ticket.’

Everybody in the room kept mum. Ultimately the same old trick of collecting *chanda* was resorted to. Everybody contributed to the price of Nemichand’s return journey. I gave the money to Nemichand.

‘Take the money and catch the first available train,’ I told him.

‘I will not go,’ he said firmly. He urged me, ‘Please ask Sanawatji whether he will allow me to stay with him. I will do anything for him.’

I tried hard to reason with him but he would not listen. At last, I had no choice but to go to Sanawatji. Nemichand listened to our conversation very intently.

‘Nemichand says...’ I began carefully.

‘Now what?’

‘He says he wants to stay with you.’

‘He wants to stay with me? Just tell me, how can a poor leader of a poor community afford to have a worker who buys garlands with his own money?’

I left the room without saying a word. Nemichand was sitting alone in the adjoining hall, staring blankly at the whirling ceiling fan. He did not ask any questions, nor did I say anything to him. I went to sleep. Outside it was raining heavily. I was shivering because of the cold. Thinking that the fan was running at full speed, I switched on the light. Nemichand was sitting in a chair under the fan, half naked and perspiring profusely. I was shocked.

I asked him, ‘Why haven’t you gone to bed? Are you not well?’





‘It’s hot here. I will take a bath.’

‘My god! I am so cold and you are talking of it being hot here. Have you gone mad?’

‘No, I don’t feel the cold. See if Sanawatji is sleeping with a rug.’

When he saw Sanawatji sleeping in his rug, he quietly went to sleep, pulling a rug over his own head.

The next morning he was down with high fever. I fetched Sanawatji’s special morning tea. He seemed to be in a good mood. Feasting on his butter toast and taking sips of his delicious tea, he talked to the workers in a light mood.

‘Atmaram! You are a married man now. How long can you stay with me? I am aware of your problem. I wish to open a college here for you, which will fetch a regular income. You will be the ultimate authority of the institution. You will take the entire income. But you have to look after my Delhi office. We can collect money for the college from all over the country. Do you agree to the proposal?’

Initially I was stunned by the tempting offer. But I quickly gained my senses.

‘We will see about it later. But now...’

‘Are you mad?’ he said.

‘I don’t know whether I am mad, but I am certain that Nemichand is,’ I said.

‘Who are you to give that certificate?’ he countered.

Later on the doctor informed me, ‘The patient is suffering some mental shock. He needs to be taken to a mental hospital. I will give you a letter.’

‘I will take him to the mental hospital,’ I offered, ‘Please inform Sanawatji. He must be waiting for me.’ My throat was parched. The doctor understood my predicament. He phoned Sanawatji and explained Nemichand’s condition. He gave me the receiver and started writing the letter.

‘This is Atmaram speaking...’

‘Yes, this is Sanawat.’ His voice came through the wire.

‘The doctor says...’ My voice began to quiver. He promptly





interjected, 'I know. Take him to the hospital and come back immediately. I have to rush to Pondicherry by the evening train.'

'But only yesterday you said we were staying here for fifteen days.'

'You may stay here. I am going.'

'What about Nemichand?'

'Admit him to the hospital as per the directions of the doctor, and rush back immediately.' He hung up.

I put down the phone and gave the doctor a pathetic look. He handed me the letter and said, 'Go ahead and god bless him...'

'Where are we going?' Nemichand asked, soon after we came out of the hospital.

'To another doctor, more expert than Dr. Kittoor. He himself has recommended it. He has also written a letter for the doctor.' I tried to minimize his anxiety.

'Am I really so ill?' he voiced his suspicion.

'No, but there is no guarantee of these doctors. If they feel bored, they send the patient to another doctor.' I tried to reason with him,

I don't remember the name of the psychiatrist, but upon hearing it Nemichand grew disturbed and asked with expressionless eyes focused on me, 'Why have you brought me here?'

The question irritated me. I said, 'Why do you ask this question when I've already told you that you need medical examination by a doctor?'

I thought Nemichand did not understand me. Suddenly he broke free from me and ran away. With no sentry at the gate, his escape was that much easier. I searched for him all around, but he was nowhere to be seen. At last I phoned Sanawatji from the Gol Market post office. Without listening to what I had to say, Sanawatji growled, 'Why are you so late? Do you know how much value Gandhiji used to attach to punctuality? How can we work for the poor?'

I was in no mood to listen to Sanawatji's self-righteousness. I stopped him midway and narrated the whole episode concerning Nemichand. He said, 'It's all right. But why are you so late when I told you to rush back immediately?'





‘I know. But Nemichand has fled from the mental hospital. How can I come till I find Nemichand? Is it not my duty to search for him?’

He shouted at me at a high pitch, ‘How can I serve my poor people if I get involved in caring for such madcaps? What will happen to the poor workers of the poor society? You rush back immediately.’

‘But Uncle...’ I tried to cajole him. In the *tanda* if you address an elderly person as Uncle and a young leader as *Bhau*, they are very pleased. As soon as I addressed him as Kaka he seemed somewhat mollified, and was prepared to at least listen to me. ‘Uncle, anything could happen to Nemichand now. What should we do?’

‘Look,’ he said quietly, ‘a social worker should not worry about lunatics and illiterates! Let it be; you will not understand these things. You are still not mature enough. Rush back immediately—we have so much work to do. I shall go to Pondicherry tonight.’ He put down the phone.

I went back to our office and accompanied Sanawatji to the parliament house. He was unnecessarily loitering in some ministers’ cabins. Was this deliberate, to avoid Nemichand? In my heart I was terribly annoyed. Where was Nemichand? What would happen to him?

Sanawatji was not happy with my mood, but he had no courage to speak his mind. He relented. We came back to our flat. We could not believe our eyes. Nemichand was sitting in front of the closed door in a dejected mood. I felt relieved. How could I tell what Sanawatji’s feelings were?

The taxi arrived. I locked Nemichand in the flat and went to the railway station to see Sanawatji off. Even there he persisted with his question: ‘What have you decided?’

I wanted to leave Delhi immediately. But not with this cunning leader. Besides, there was the problem of Nemichand. He had to be conveyed home safely. And there was still another reason for staying in Delhi another week—the Independence Day celebrations were just eight days away. Like a child, I was so eager to see the spectacular show at the Red Fort. It was in fact my childhood dream. I did not





want to disclose my inner desire to Sanawat. There was no use telling him. 'What have you decided?' he asked again.

'No. No, I cannot take the decision without consulting my family. I will think it over,' I said.

'What is there to consult the family about? Thousands of people sacrificed their lives at Gandhiji's call without caring for their families.'

'I know. But it was Gandhiji's call. Gandhi had a clear goal, and it was based on high moral values.' I spoke without allowing Sanawat to read my mind. By now I was very well versed in Sanawat's scheming, his cunning ways and his deft use of words and language and theatrics. I was determined not to be taken in by his sweet tongue.

But he was very shrewd. He did not give up hope. 'Let us not talk of high moral values. We can also take our aims to a higher pedestal.'

I was reminded of P. L. Deshpande's farcical play *Pudhari Pahije* (*Leader Wanted*). The character in the play, a communist, wants the entire universe to be nationalized. Sanawatji assured me that if I went along with him, he would raise the stature of our aims.

'Let us see.' I changed the subject. 'When are you coming back?'

'After at least a month,' he said coldly.

'What about me? How can I live without money here.'

'I have some forty rupees with me. Keep the money. Besides, I will give you some addresses. You can borrow money from there.'

'And if I don't get anything from them?'

'No. No. It's not possible. I'm sure you will get the money. And even if you were to starve for the cause of society, how does it matter? I will send money immediately after I reach Bombay from Pondicherry.'

Thinking about my trip home, I bade him goodbye. When I returned to the flat it was very late at night. Nemichand was taking a shower. It pained me to see his condition. I managed to take him out of the bathroom with some consoling words.

'Has he left?' he asked.

'Yes.'

'Can I ask you some questions? Will you tell the truth?'





‘Yes, I will tell you the truth as far as I know.’

‘Am I so worthless as to be unable to do any social work?’ he asked with a quiver in his voice.

‘No. In fact you have some of the best qualities,’ I told him emphatically. I asked, ‘Why should you insist on working with Sanawatji and get upset when he refuses to allow you to continue?’

‘Although he did not allow me to stay with him, he is still a great man. Really a big man.’

‘Yes, he is a “great man”,’ I said. ‘But let it be. Give me your address.’

He gave me the address. I sent a telegram to his relatives. When they came, I handed him over to them. Later I heard that he had indeed gone mad. However, I had no way to inquire after him, as I had lost the diary in which I had noted down his address.

I visited the historical places in Delhi, like the Red Fort, Kutub Minar, Okhla Lake and the Safdarjung Gurudwara, which is connected with the history of the Banjara community. You will not believe this, but it’s a historical fact that the parliament house of independent India was built on the ‘land of lakhs’ of the Banjaras. When Sikh Guru Tegbahadur was hanged in Chandni Chowk on the orders of Mughal emperor Aurangzeb, lakhs of Banjaras let loose their thousands of bullocks, unleashing unprecedented chaos. Taking advantage of the chaos, the Banjaras managed to retrieve the head of Guru Tegbahadur and perform the last rites in their tanda. Some hundred years later a Gurudwara was built on the site where Guru Tegbahadur was cremated. However, the tanda had to be shifted to avoid the ire of Aurangzeb. Later the parliament house was constructed at the same place. Once I learned its history, it was impossible for an emotional person like me not to visit this historically significant place. I was deeply moved by the sight of the place.

I borrowed some money from Chandagiram Sabana, a Banjara, and left Delhi. I had barely enough to reach Yavatmal, and I had never undertaken a journey with so little money in my pocket.

Translated by D. T. Nandan Pawar



From *Uchalya*, by Laxman Gaikwad

The Branded

Preparations were being made for the 15th August function. 15th August was a day of celebration for our school. I said to our Dhimdhime Guruji, 'Guruji, I want to make a speech.' Dhimdhime Guruji loved me. He always admired my efforts in a way, for only one boy from the Pathrut clan had ever taken the trouble to learn in a school.

Dhimdhime Guruji himself was a Mahar by caste. He replied, 'Make a speech. I'll include your name among the speakers.' I was very happy. I prepared for the speech by reading the lessons on Gandhiji and Jawaharlal Nehru.

On 15th August Dhimdhime Guruji announced that a boy from the school was going to address the audience. Afterwards, Patil, the chief guest, was to deliver a speech. Guruji signalled me to go to the *dais*. I had said I would make a speech, but I trembled with nervousness when I saw all the people of the village gathered there. As it was, I was afraid even to pass by the village sarpanch and patil. Now the very thought of making a speech before them made me tongue-tied. Even then I somehow mustered up the courage and went and stood near the flag. All the village dignitaries were sitting on chairs before me. I stood in front of them and spoke.

'All the teachers from our school and respected people of our village, and my brothers and sisters; this morning we held a rally through the village because our country became free on this day. Mahatma Gandhi and Pandit Nehru made our country free for us in 1947. We must guard that freedom.'

As I said these lines, my hands and feet trembled with nervousness.





I had crammed this much; I could not remember anything else. I sat down.

It was all over the village that Pathurat's Lakshya had made a speech and had also sung in the rally. So I felt I had grown wiser. Father came to know that I had made a speech, and now encouraged me: 'Go ahead with your schooling. I shall buy you a cycle, if I can pay off the advance I have taken and save some money after the payment.' I felt that if I passed that year, I would at least get employed as a policeman or a peon. So school went very well.

But at home we were nearly starving. Sometimes there was no food in the house for four or five days. Sometimes we cooked broken or coarsely ground grain, but mostly it was *milo*. There were too many mouths to feed. We used to prepare watery gruel of coarsely ground milo in a big pot. At intervals we bought a kilo of milo from a ration shop. We used to coarse-grind it. It was full of worms and insects, but we were so hungry that we greedily drank that hot, insect-ridden gruel without ever bothering to filter out the bugs.

Each of us received four large spoons of that thin gruel. I used to drink my gruel and also some from the shares of Anna or Bhau. Hence I never sat for meals without them. I would keep watch, and when Anna and Bhau sat for their gruel I sat with them. My sisters-in-law did not like this—they got angry because I ate from their husbands' shares—but still I sat with them like a shameless fellow. When Bhau and Anna did not give me any of their share, I would rub my plate and lick my hands, and then lick the plate with my tongue. I used to stare at Bhau's and Anna's gruel greedily, so even when they went hungry they angrily offered me some of theirs, muttering, 'Lakshimanya is like a curse.' Even then my hunger would not be fully satisfied; I would scrape whatever was stuck at the bottom of the pot and eat that too. I never got even a single full meal a day.

Father took his meals at Chamle's. Since I was the youngest in the house, Father used to call me to the farm where he worked. He shared half his bhakar with me, going half hungry himself.

Father had given me the duty of bringing his bhakar from Chamle's house after school. I had wanted just such an opportunity.





Half starved, I used to carry father's meals to him from Chamle's home. I still remember Chamle's food. When I went to Chamle's place to get Father's meals, Kisanmai gave them with a generous hand. She looked after Father very well. She gave him buttermilk in a jar, vegetable curry to eat his bhakar with in another bowl and finally the bhakar, tied in a piece of cloth.

I used to set out with this food to the farm where Father worked. From the vegetable in the bowl came an enticing smell. When I saw those white jowar bhakars and buttermilk, my belly would be roused with desire; my mouth would water, My conscience told me that the bhakar Kisanmai had given was just enough for my father. My belly, on the other hand, was all afire with hunger; and never did we get such delicious bhakar and vegetable at home.

I used to be so eager to reach the shepherd's panand that I wished I could instantly fly there and eat the bhakar. On reaching the panand I looked around, inserted two fingers into the bundle in which the bhakar was tied, pulled out a piece of the bhakar and put it into my mouth. I used to stir the vegetable curry in the bowl with a stick and drink a little of it. It tasted so delicious that I felt like eating all the bhakars and the vegetable curry. But there was also the nagging feeling that Father would go hungry.

If a piece was broken off the full bhakar, anyone could easily see that someone had eaten part of the bhakar. So I used to break the full bhakar into quarter pieces, and wipe my mouth clean to leave no telltale evidence. It was thus that I would go to Chamle's farm and call my Father loudly: 'Father! Father!'

If Father had been irrigating the farm all morning, he would be very hungry. Hearing me call, he would stop his work and sit down to eat. Then he would say to me, 'Laxman, what was prepared for meals at home?' I would reply, 'A little corn gruel.' Father would offer me half a *bhakar* and some vegetable curry on a plate—so I got something to eat there, too. Father never suspected that I might have eaten some of the food on the way. He never asked Chamle's wife why he sometimes received scanty fare. So I got some of my father's share...but still I wondered if I would ever get a full satisfying meal.

Chamle's sons came to school with groundnuts and salted nuts





in their pockets. They ate outside class during recess. I used to beg them to give me some. On such occasions I wondered why God had not granted me birth in Chamle's home so that I, too, could have good things to eat and decent shirts and pants to wear. In our home, we had to go half starved all year round.

In Ashada-Shravana we did not get bhakar at all. Then we would pluck the leaves of sweet potatoes from the farm where Father used to work. We used to boil the leaves, throw out the water, grind the leaves into a paste, and make *mutke kotbalet*. For many, many days we lived on this. We completely denuded the sweet-potato plants, leaving the farm a leafless desert. Because we took away the leaves, father's landlord abused and scolded him and made him sit home for eight days.

Father could not say a word in protest when he saw us taking the leaves of the sweet-potato plants, because he knew that we were starving at home. So Father told his master the truth: that his sons took the leaves to cook and eat. This resulted in his suspension from work for eight days, for taking leaves that even animals do not eat readily.

When sweet-potato leaves were no longer available, we starved almost to death. Nobody from the village gave us work. Father had already taken things on credit from shops, so we could not buy anything from the shops. Finally, we were forced to eat all sorts of leaves: leaves of *gadhav kata*, *tarvata*, *kurdu*, *dagdi*, *shepu*, carrot and such other wild plants. We felt gratified if we could get even these. We often suffered from loose motions because we ate too many of these leaves.

There was a time when even such leaves were scarce, when we passed through a period of drought. Once my elder sister-in-law brought kurdu leaves. We had eaten no food for four days, so we fried these leaves in an iron pan. There was no oil, so we fried the leaves by putting a little salt on them. My sister-in-law gave us all our usual shares. Even those kurdu leaves without anything to go with them tasted so delicious that I craved more and still more.

After giving us our shares, my sister-in-law put Kesar Vahini's share in a small bowl in a niche in the wall and went out to collect





fuel from the rubbish heaps. Seeing that there was nobody else at home, I stealthily went to the niche. I could not reach it, so I put a basket underneath, and standing on it I took some vegetable out of the bowl and ate it. Unfortunately, my sister-in-law arrived just then and saw me in the act. She had a piece of wood in her hand, which she had pulled out of a bamboo hedge. She shouted at me angrily, 'You dirty vagabond, you bastard! You've eaten Kesar's share also.' She gave me three or four lusty strokes on my buttocks. I began to howl loudly.

Just then Kesar Vahini returned from her work. She had received half a bhakar from the house where she had retouched the grindstone. The two sisters-in-law ate the bhakar and the vegetable looking at me all the while. I stared back at them greedily, hoping for a spare morsel, but they gave me nothing. At night I complained to Dada and Anna of their behaviour. Dada beat his wife, I complained with much exaggeration and distortion, but my words were in vain.

Sometimes hunger gnawed at my intestines so badly that I went in search of offerings made to evil spirits. In the month of Shravan, on full-moon and new-moon days, parents made offerings of food and coconuts to propitiate evil spirits if their children were seriously ill. Such offerings were found in cremation yards, supposedly the haunt of evil spirits.

Nobody dared eat the coconuts and food offered to evil spirits, but with my belly all afire with hunger, I did not bother about spirits and ghosts. I used to kick the coconut thrice and take the food. The top of the food offered to evil spirits was smeared with oil and black soot. I did not feel like throwing away even such offerings—I scraped away the blackened part of the food, sat under a tree on a farm and ate. I would break the coconut and eat the kernel. I did always offer a small piece of the coconut and a little portion of the food to the evil spirits to propitiate them lest they haunt me. Only after eating the food did I go home. I believed the ghost came with me, stuck to my feet, so I used to wash my feet before entering the hut.

On one occasion we lived only on water for eight or nine days. Father borrowed an anna, bought a *chhatak* of jaggery mixed it with water in a pot and gave a cup of jaggery-water to each to us—Dada,





Bhau, sister-in-law, Harchanda, me, Kesar Vahini—and took one himself. On these days I used to put my arms round Father's neck and weep bitterly for food. I used to make rounds of rubbish heaps and search for dried mango stones and tamarind seeds, collect them, roast them and eat them. Sometimes Dada and Father would visit other villages and steal a pig. When there was truly nothing to eat, I would spread salt on the grindstone and lick it avidly for whatever flour was stuck there.

On days of acute starvation Dada, Bhau, Anna, Narya Tulshiram, Bhima and I went to distant places, searched for a farm with a good standing crop and stole full ears of wheat, jowar, bajra, chillis and groundnuts. They distributed the loot during the night.

Fearing the farmer might find the stolen loot, we used to beat the stolen ears, separate the gram, make a fire and roast the gram that remained in the bucket. We took care not to thrash the husk. Everybody in the hut, young and old, woke up in the dead of night to help, and after the gram was roasted thoroughly the women ground it. In the meantime I would fetch a pot of water and keep it on the fire to boil. The coarse-ground grain would boil into a soft thick gruel, and thus we would satisfy our three-or four-day-old hunger with a little boiled grain.

But my hunger was even then not fully satisfied. So I would get up in the morning and pick and eat the particles that had popped out of the pot while the gram was being boiled, and eat those caked-with-mud morsels.

Occasionally, I went without bhakar for two or more months at a stretch. Sometimes farmers who slept outside to guard their crops were disturbed in their sleep and woke up while we were stealing. On such occasions Tulshiram imitated the hoots of owls and the yelps of foxes so the farmers did not suspect the presence of thieves; and we waited till the farmers went back to sleep and silence was restored to proceed with our business of stealing.

One night our gang had gone to steal something from a farm in the village of Shivani. Some farmers saw some of the gang plucking ears from the gram crop. They began to shout, 'Thieves! Thieves!'





and hurl stones at us with their slings. So our gang fled, throwing down the plucked ears. Dada, however, conscious that everybody at home was starving and anxiously waiting for him to bring home something to eat, began to run with his load of plucked ears, and thus lagged behind the others. A stone, hurled from a sling, crashed into his head. He was hurt very badly. Even so, unmindful of the deep wound, he kept running with the load of ears. When they were a safe distance away from the farm, Tulshiram and Sambha, with the help of a flint, made a fire, and by its light found some *jakam jodicha pala*. They pressed it into his wound and dressed it with a ragged piece of cloth.

On reaching home Dada's dhoti, which had smears of blood all over it, was washed clean by bhabhi in the night to leave no trace of what had happened. We were all glad that Dada had returned home. Had he been caught, he would have been beaten to death.

People of our fraternity living in Bhadgaon never starved. They did brisk business and collected enough for a decent living. Hence there was close competition among our tribesmen to give their daughters in marriage to versatile thieves from Bhadgaon. Such a marriage assured a good, comfortable life for the girl; in fact, versatile eligible thieves from Bhadgaon, Kavatha, Salgara and Solapur, were always sought as good prospective husbands. That is why these towns are known as Uchalyacha Kavata and Uchalyacha Bhadgaon.

Our village indulged in large-scale thieving only in Ashadh-Shravan. In other months some went begging, and others went into the grindstone-retouching business. My brother, Manik Dada, and Narya, who was purchased by Tulshiram, were the only two trained in the art and craft of thieving.

In our fraternity, Sambha, Bhima and Pandurang had donkeys. They used to go on a fortnightly trip to retouch grindstones. They earned well in this business. Our lane appeared well crowded on their return from such trips. There used to be donkeys and dogs everywhere, causing quite a hubbub. When they were on their trips, the lane appeared disconcertingly deserted.

When Sambha, Tulshiram, Pandurang and Linga returned from their business trips, we spent our nights gossiping with them.





Tulshiram and Sambha often boasted that they had had plenty of good food to eat while they were away. They talked of the number of marriage feasts they had enjoyed. They spoke of Gangubai of Shivani town, who gave them a jarful of pure unadulterated buttermilk and the previous day's bhakars, and Sevanta of Ramjanpur, who gave them a fully satisfying meal of chapatis for working on only one millstone. Whenever I heard these tales, my mouth watered with desire. I felt like skipping school and going with Tulshiram on these trips. Tulshiram purposely boasted to us, knowing full well our famished condition.

I, together with Tulshiram, Sambha, Narya and Tukya, always attended marriage and funeral feasts, wherever they might be. I used to skip school and accompany them to these feasts. Tukya, Panchafuli, Hanma, and I always kept a close watch on the nearby villages—Ramjanpur, Vmarga, Shivani, Bhusani, Bhavalgaon, Bhatkheda. If there were no marriage feasts, there were other feasts for one reason or another; we noted these and informed everybody in our fraternity: 'Look, there is a feast today at such and such place.' Then all of us—men, women and children—took our pots, bowls and whatever other containers were available and walked eight or nine miles to the site of the feast.

On these days we were careful not to drink water. Tulshiram used to advise us: 'Children, don't drink water. If you drink water, you cannot eat well.' Without drinking water for a couple of days, we would get hungry, and this would give us hiccups, but still we did not drink water.

Walking through mud and thorns our feet hurt sorely. If a thorn pierced deep into the flesh, it hurt as though life itself was being drained out. We only thought of when we would reach the place, and how much we would eat. With feet burning and aching, we fell on the food and ate till we almost brought it up.

Once there was the wedding of the son of the patil of Bhauni. Bundi was being served in the wedding feast. People from two or three villages around had been invited. We all went together. We sat and ate our fill during the first round of the feast, and then continued to sit for the subsequent rounds. At every round we pocketed the





bundi served; later we met Tukya outside the village and handed over the collected bundi. We repeated this through two or three rounds, collecting a good amount of bundi.

We felt rather guilty that we were eating at the feast while those at home were starving. So we thought of collecting some bundi for them also, and kept on collecting as much as we could. One of the servers suspected me. He kept a watch on me, and when I sat in the line once again, he held me by the ears and gave me two or three resounding slaps on the face, shouting, 'What village are you from? Is this your father's food? How many times have you sat down to eat?' He beat me and threw me out of the dining hall.

I wailed, 'I won't do it again!'

He cursed at me. 'Fuck his mother, the bastard doesn't know which caste he belongs to, Mahar or Mang! He has polluted the feast by his unholy attendance, and stayed and ate through two or three rounds.' The others at the feast asked the server to let me alone. It was not good to make a row over food, they said. Only then did the man let me go.

I left the village crying. While I was being caught and beaten, the others in our gang had run away. They did not wait for me outside the village; they feared I might disclose their names, and all the bundi we had collected might be taken away. So they were waiting some three or four furlongs away. I searched for them and finally met them, weeping all the while. I had to find them quickly because I feared that Tukya and Sambha might run away with my share of the bundi.

Tulshiram shouted at me, 'Lakshya, don't you have brains? Don't you know that one person serves food through a round? Why didn't you sit at the next round? Did you have to sit at the same round twice? That's why I told your father not to send you to school. You'll always remain a simpleton. Look at my Tukya, how smart and agile he is! He is never caught anywhere. Only merchants and brahmins go to school. We cannot make a living unless we roam around and keep visiting new villages and towns. Okay, forget it. Whatever happens, you must not disclose our names. We thought you would tell our names and get us beaten up with you.'





The group of us—Sambha, Tukya and Tulshiram—approached our village. We took our shares of bundi and went to our houses. Everybody gathered round the bundi I had brought as dogs gather round a carcass. They finished it off in a matter of minutes.

Eating such food as we rarely got at home, I began to crave it. I did not care if I was cursed, beaten or thrown out. I ceased to feel ashamed of such humiliation. I would do anything to get even a little tidbit.

In Dhanegaon the Mhaskes and the Chamles gave the village folk ritual meals in honour and memory of their ancestors. We formed a gang that regularly attended these meals. Me, Tukya, Narya and Kerya carried plates. One of us kept watch to find out when the meals were being served to guests, and as soon as the time came, we ran fast to the spot. While the guests were having their meal in the house, we stationed ourselves close by and stared at them greedily. Whenever we saw a person running with a fully loaded plate to serve, we wailed and begged: ‘Karbhari, give us some food.’ We wailed loudly in the hope that the people dining inside might hear us and ask someone to throw us some scraps just to keep us quiet. We kept on howling: ‘Give us some food!’

Dogs barked as we wailed. Dogs also crowded with us to lick the leftover food from the thrown-out *patravali*. When the diners had eaten their food and left the hall, someone from among them would say, ‘Oh, there, throw these Pathruts some food.’ Then we would get half a roti and some vegetable in a bowl. Sometimes they would throw us leftovers from their *patravalis*. We collected these and ate them right on the street. But sometimes the guests attacked us, brandishing sticks, and abused us and drove us away.

Thus hankering after food made me miss school quite often. Balacharya Guruji beat me severely. Things went on in this way, and then it was time for the fourth-standard board examination. I used to think then that, whether I studied further or not, I had to get through the fourth-standard examination so I might secure employment as either a police constable or a peon. So I studied very hard. I wished I could get into government service.





Sopan, the father of Babusha, was a versatile pickpocket. His fourth wife¹ was equally adroit at thieving. Her name was Yellava. In a way Sopan was a son-in-law of our family—our sister was given to him in marriage, so we were quite closely associated. Sopan and his wife earned quite well. Sopan wore a silk turban and rings on his fingers. Yellava cut necklaces, mangalsutras and other trinkets very skillfully with her teeth. She was extremely smart and agile. On every round of thieving she collected one or two chhataks of gold. Sometimes on their way back, Sopan and Yellava visited us and stayed with us for a few days. They used to tell us that if they went back to their village, the police would find them, so they sold the stolen gold and shared the booty with us.

Whenever Yellava came to our hut, she brought a big bundle with many smaller bundles stolen from various places. It held saris, chaddars, blouses and dhotis. We used to buy from these collections and in turn sell to people of our fraternity. People from the village used to learn of her arrival and buy *chaddars*, dhotis and saris for themselves. A sari cost five or six rupees. All the clothes were old clothes; I don't remember seeing anyone buy new clothes when we were living in Dhanegaon. Clothes were bought only from such thieves. That's why our relatives from Jawali were well off; they supported us. When we received their old clothes, I wore them and strutted about like a hero.

One day Anna, Dada and Bhau were preparing to leave on one of their usual thieving missions. I said to Manikdada, 'Take me with you. You're going to Tuljapur for thieving, and my school is closed. Let me go with you to bow in obeisance and pay my respect to the goddess.'

Anna said, 'You are a schoolgoing boy. If you're caught by the police, you will be removed from school. Your name will go down in the police records as a thief.' But I was indifferent to these arguments. I only knew that I got good things to eat when I accompanied them on thieving trips. I cried and pestered them to take me.

1. In this community, children born of different wives but the same father are allowed to marry.





So Manikdada, Sambha, Bhau, Anna Bhagwan and I set out for the Tuljapur Fair. As we departed, Bhau stole a cock, and I bought a Bharat blade from Govind Patil's shop. Bhau cut the cock with the blade. Its blood was sprinkled on everybody's rail passes and the family goddess, and we prayed: 'O Mother Goddess, Tulja Bhavani! Bless us with success in our thieving mission! Bless us with valuable things!' We also prayed and bowed in obeisance before the basket and the beads of the goddess, and set out on our mission.

We came to the Latur Railway Station to travel by rail. We met a police constable who knew Dada. (Dada was a well-known thief in Latur.) The policeman asked Dada, 'Where the hell are you going, Mankya?' Dada was struck dumb. Bhagwan, Anna, Sambha and Bhau quickly hid themselves in latrines. I stood apart with the bundle.

Dada replied, 'I'm going to see my relatives at Jawali.'

The policeman retorted, 'You bastard, you're telling me a lie. You're going to the Tuljapur Fair by this train. Where are your cronies? Are you going to give me something or shall I take you to the police station?'

Dada begged, 'Please don't. I'm only going to Jawali.'

The policeman questioned him further: 'You bastard. Yesterday a purse containing a thousand rupees was picked at the bus stand—who took it? Somebody from your gang took it.'

Dada begged and pleaded piteously, and gave the policeman thirty rupees from his pocket. The policeman then said, 'All right, Mankya, go, but meet me again. You're trying to get away with paying very little, mind you.' The policeman let him go.

My hands and legs were trembling with fear. I thought my name would go into the police records and I would be thrown out of school. I feared Dada might be arrested.

Dada asked me where Sambha and Bhagwan had gone. At that moment Bhagwan, Anna and Bhau came out of the latrines. The train also arrived, and we got into it hurriedly. Still, there was a lurking fear that some other police constable might see us, so we sat in the last bogie, furthest from the engine. We arrived at Edshi and from there made our way to Tuljapur.





Dada was very pleased to see the dense crowd milling around. Many other thieves had arrived with the same purpose as ours. Santaram Bhauji from Jawali was there. Sambha Bhau took me to pay obeisance to Goddess Tuljamai. Manikdada, Bhagwan and Anna were already moving about in the crowd. Sambha Bhau kept a watch on the visitors' bundles. I was made to stand in a distant corner to look after the stolen bundles. Bhau went to the temple and came out with a new pair of chappals, which he asked me to put into a bundle immediately. By then Dada had also picked a purse, containing two hundred fifty rupees, from a bus stand. Anna brought four or five pairs of *chappals*, a pair of shoes and two shoulder bags in which we found saris, dhotis and chaddars.

Then we went to the temple to take a bath in the tank in which water poured through a cow-mouthed opening. There we saw many women from well-to-do families taking a bath. They wore piles of gold ornaments around their necks. We began our search for an opportunity.

In one place all the women had removed their ornaments: necklaces, locket and other trinkets, and had tied them in a piece of cloth and kept them under a basket. They had asked an old woman to sit on the basket while they went to take a bath. Dada became restless. The old woman was sitting on the basket; she would not move. Dada and Anna could not think of a way to steal those ornaments. Just then our brother-in-law Santaram of Jawali showed up with his wife Yellava. Dada told Santaram that there were ornaments under the basket on which the old woman was sitting.

Santaram Bhauji began to ponder the problem. What was to be done? He brought a kilo of *pedhes* and signalled to us. We went near the old woman and stood around her in a crowd. Santaram began to distribute the *pedhes*. Dada, Bhau and Anna began to shout: 'Give me! Give me!' People gathered round Santaram and received *pedhes* from him, but still the old woman would not move.

Santaram then got a change for a hundred-rupee note in fivers and began to drop the notes near the old woman, one by one. The old woman saw a note dropped but sat still. Santaram walked a little ahead and dropped another note, then yet another. When the third





note was dropped, the old woman got up from the basket and began to pick up the notes. As the old woman proceeded to pick up the notes, Dada and Santaram's wife quickly lifted the lid from the basket and grabbed the bundle of ornaments. The old woman picked up the currency and sat on the basket as before.

By then the women had returned from their bath. The old woman said, 'Oh my daughters, Goddess Bhawanimai blessed me. I received treasure.'

The women, while changing their saris, asked, 'What did you get?'

After changing they asked the old woman to get up from the basket so that they could take their ornaments. The bride among them put her hand in the basket. There was nothing. They all began to beat their breasts and tear their hair and howl. The old woman began to put dust in her mouth and wail, 'The bastard dropped five-rupee notes and deceived me!' They all began to wail and weep loudly.

Santaram murmured, 'Let's go. The theft is known to all now.' As we had picked up an unusually bountiful treasure, we walked to a distant field and sat under a tree instead of going to the station. We untied the bundle and gave Santaram and Yellava their share. Both were pleased to receive it, for it was Santaram who had used his imagination to steal the ornaments.

Santaram was very clever, and well versed in the ways of this profession. He wore snow-white clothes, a red silk turban and bhasma on his forehead, and always kept in his pocket lemon, turmeric powder, vermilion powder, frankincense, needles, nuts and cowrie shells. He did all this just to throw suspicion off him in case he got caught while a theft was in progress; and he impressed people with his personality. When he was caught at a fair and his pockets were searched, the things found in them made people think that he was learned in the ways of black magic, so they left him alone, fearing he might practise *bhanamati* on them.

After stealing the ornaments we decided to go to Jawali. When we got there we distributed the shares of our earnings, and Santaram killed a pig and brought liquor. Manikdada, Bhau and Anna forced





me to drink some liquor, telling me that it was good for my health as it kept coughs away. Santaram gave Dada two necklaces and a ring in a rough estimate of his share. We were pleased with whatever we received, and returned home with good loot.

Manikdada said to Father, 'Laxman brought success. He is lucky.'

Father, however, rejected Dada's remarks, saying, 'Only the three of you may go on thieving trips. Let him to school!' Turning to me he said 'Look, Laxman, don't go again with them. You may go during vacation, but don't ever miss school.'

Since Dada, Harchanda and Annabhau had started thieving, many people of our fraternity had started visiting us from various places. They distributed the shares amongst themselves at our place. Sometimes there were serious disagreements ending in violent quarrels and bloody fights.

If anyone in the gang failed to inform his cronies that he had picked a pocket and taken the stolen money away or passed it on to his household, the *talange* of our community and the thieving gangs came together to adjudicate the affair. Since we were the *talange* in our village, the *patils* from other places and gangs assembled at our house.

The panchayat used to convene on the farm of Manataya, a shepherd. There was a mango tree there, and also a water facility. When the panchayat assembled it became a crowded affair, with people milling all around. Everybody received travelling expenses, and the *patils* had to be given either a hundred and one or a hundred fifty-one rupees each as an honorarium. All the *patils* from our area used to attend. The accused, for whom the panchayat had been called into session, had to bear all the expenses of liquor, meat, vegetable cutlets and the other fixings of panchayat meals.

The members of the panchayat would arrive for the session in white dhoti, white shirt and white *uparana*. Then the panchayat would sit in judgement.

The opinion was frequently divided. Some *panchas* would hold the petitioner to be right while others would insist the accused was in the right. This created a confusing situation, resulting in much argument and hubbub.





Once the panchayat was in session, it would stay in session for three days in a row under the same tree. When at last a unanimous decision was obtained from all the panchas after much debate, and the accused convicted of guilt, he would be fined. The fine would range from five hundred fifty to five thousand rupees. If the accused had been convicted of falsehood in his dealings with other members of the gang, he and his treacherous accomplices would be required to go on thieving missions for two to six months as directed by the panchayat. They would not get their shares of the loot because they had betrayed the professional faith of the gang. Even if the person stole anything on his own, he had no right to it. If the convicted person refused to pay the fine, he was ostracized.

Once, a Shankar from Salgara used his daughter as a wife. A large panchayat sat in judgement. Once it had a session in Salgara, then in Dhanegaon, then again in Bhadgaon. Some of the patils could not reach a decision.

If the case under consideration was highly complicated and serious, and there were serious disagreements and quarrels, the final panchayat would meet at Kavatha. In Kavatha there lived a *master-kaka*, the first teacher from our community. He would pass judgement and resolve the tangle. The decision taken at the Kavatha Panchayat would be final.

The panchayat was in session in Kavatha for a fortnight. The panchayat came to the conclusion that Shankarya had used his daughter as his wife and thereby brought shame to the community and spoiled its name. The panchayat ostracized Shankarya and his daughter for two years, and as further punishment dictated that Shankarya's moustache be shaved with the piss of his daughter.

If anyone dared to touch, give refuge or serve meals on a plate to the person ostracized, that relative or person would also be ostracized. Hence the news of an ostracization was passed on to all the members of our community. Just as Patils and Deshmukhs keep separate cups and saucers for Mahars and Mangs, we also kept separate plates for food and water for the ostracized. For there was always some person ostracized at any given time.

Shankarya visited our village once after he was ostracized, and





was served water in a coconut shell. We also served him water in a plate and gave him rods and vegetable in an iron basket generally used while digging trenches. We did not take him into the house; we simply gave him a tattered cloth to lie on and a tattered quilt with which to cover himself. When he went away Shankarya took these things with him.

In our community the decision of the panchayat must be obeyed. Nobody takes amiss the treatment accorded as a result of the panchayat's directive. Shankarya felt in no way aggrieved or insulted at the treatment given to him; his behaviour to us was quite friendly and normal.

Once we—Bhabhi, Anna, Kesar Vahini, Dada and I—went to Mahalangra to attend a marriage. A cloud of fear always hung over a wedding in our community; no one knew how it would end or whether the ceremony would conclude at all. On that day, two marriages were being performed simultaneously in Mahalangra. People were drunk, claiming that the groom was not received with proper respect, and that the sari due to his grandmother as a gift of honour was not given. Somehow the quarrel was settled and the marriage ceremony began.

It was now time to arrange the ritual bath for the bridegroom and bride. The bath is customarily performed with the sacred ritual of thread-winding. The bathing bowl contains water mixed with vermilion and turmeric, and is customarily wound with a sacred thread by married women who have not been ostracized. Then four married women pour the water from the bathing bowl on the bodies of the bridegroom and the bride.

Kesar Vahini wound the ritual thread and our elder sister-in-law, Kashibai, began to wind the thread round the bowl. As she was about to twist and twine the thread, one of the old headmen came up and snatched it out of her hands. He said that Kashibai's grandmother had run away with a Maratha. Until her sons were not ritualistically purified and accepted back into the community, the married women from her family would not have the right to perform the thread-winding ceremony. 'We feel that we have been gravely insulted,' said the headman.





The people from our family declared, 'Our family is pure, untainted.'

Dada, Anna and Bhau said to Kashibai, 'We have received a tainted woman in our family.' Some people asked why Kashibai should be blamed, or how she came into the picture if her grandmother had run away with a Maratha.

Tukaram of Bhadgaon, Murli Mama of Salga and Maruti of Whal came together and replied, 'How can you say such a thing? Kashibai was born from the womb of the daughter of her grandmother. Hence her birth is tainted.' So the marriage ceremony was stopped till the matter was settled.

Now the panchayat of our fraternity held its session and we obstinately held to our point. Dada and Anna Bhau said, 'We are also headmen, and we will not go until we exercise the right of thread-winding!' So all the panchas deliberated, and the panchayat decided that Kashibai was untainted from her father-in-law's side, though a little tainted from her mother's side. So Kashibai should be fined twenty-one rupees and received in the community as purified. It was declared that there was no other taint in her.

Father paid the panchayat twenty-one rupees, and Kashibai wound the ritual thread round the bathing bowl for the same marriage, weeping all the while.

Translated by P. A. Kolharkar



DRAMA





✂ *Budhan:* A Play by Denotified Chharas

Denotified tribals are often tortured and killed in police custody. Budhan, who belonged to the Sabar community in the Purulia district of West Bengal, was killed in February 1998. When the Kheria Sabar Welfare Samiti and their leader, the noted Bangla writer Mahasveta Devi, arranged a post-mortem, it became clear that Budhan had died of a severe beating (rather than suicide) in police custody. The Samiti filed a case in the Calcutta High Court, and Mahasveta Devi went to Baroda to deliver the annual Verrier Elwin Lecture at the Bhasha Research Centre. As a result of her speech on denotified tribes at this momentous time, she, Laxman Gaikwad and I founded the Denotified and Nomadic Tribes Rights Action Group and began a long journey through many states to meet DNTs in person. To keep our colleagues informed of developments, I started a journal called *Budhan*.

In May of that year we visited Chharanagar, Ahmedabad, a ghetto of Chhara DNTs, and there set up a library of revolutionary and cultural literature. A group of young men and women associated themselves with the centre and started to write and produce short plays relating to social reform. In July the Calcutta High Court decided the Budhan Sabar murder case, and I printed the text of the verdict in *Budhan*. Our theatre group read the text and resolved to produce a play at our first national conference, which was ultimately attended by more than a thousand delegates including such scholars as Romila Thapar and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak.





The play made a profound impact on the audience, and the group subsequently performed it at major venues in New Delhi, Bhopal, Baroda, Pune and Bombay. Each time they did so, they modified parts of the script, so while the play was written by Dakxin Bajrange and translated by Sonal Baxi, it can truly be said to come straight from the oral tradition of tribal theatre. It is not an imaginary perception of suffering; it is based on the lived, traumatic experience of being branded a criminal.

Bhasha



Characters

Budhan | Shyamali | Judge | Inspector Ashok Roy
Assistant Superintendent of Police | Constable 1
Constable 2 | Constable 3 | Villager 1
Villager 2 | Villager 3 | Ashish | Shopkeeper
Guard | Sridhar | Prisoner

Scene I

Narrator: *Namaskar!* Before we begin the play, let us glance at our history. Of the total population of a thousand million people in India, about six crore people belong to denotified communities. For reasons unknown to anybody, we are singled out for bearing a burden. We are the DNTs or Adivasis, people belonging to ancient times. We have witnessed the changes taking place on earth for millennia. We live amidst nature. We are born in the womb of nature, and we die in the lap of nature. Or we are killed. We once owned the jungles, but today we have to fight for our rights to the same forests. For centuries the DNTs have been killed. Earlier, when a DNT passed through a village, his body was cut into pieces.

A few tribals pass through the rear part of the stage, carrying wood. A few persons hiding in the forest attack them. Their terrifying, painstricken calls of help fill the stage. The tribals are butchered. All characters stand unmoving.

Narrator: In 1979, the people of the Lodha community were tormented and drowned.

The tribals are tied to imaginary trees while Actors 1,2 and 3 speak to them.

Villager 1: Submerge their heads in water.





Villager 2: Force their heads inside the water till they stop breathing.

Villager 3: Torment them to death.

The heads of these tribals are plunged into water. They die in agony. All characters assume their original positions.

Narrator: Nobody knows just how many people from the denotified communities are killed so brutally. Most of us are unaware of the atrocities being perpetrated on them. Rights are being denied to the very people who rightfully belong to this country.

We present to you the story of one such community, the Sabars. This is the story of Budhan Sabar, a young man belonging to the Sabar community who was killed in a police atrocity. We want change! We want a revolution!

Each Actor calls for revolution, and then they all stand in a single file.

Chorus: There has already been one revolution, and another is yet to take place. That was one revolution brought about by Bapuji. This revolution will be by the DNTs.

Shyamali: What you are about to witness is not the end but a beginning.

Budhan: This is Akarbaid, a small village in West Bengal. The law views the Sabar community living here as a community of thieves.

Narrator: In this small village, Budhan was living a quiet life with his wife Shyamali and their son.

Inspector Ashok Roy: But on 10th February 1998, Budhan died. It was the day when the eyes of police officer Ashok Roy, who was used to taking the law in his own hands, fell on Budhan.





Constable 1: A horrifying act that will force you to ask: are we really free after half a century of Independence? Even after more than fifty years, the British stigma of criminality by birth continues to be attached to the DNTs.

Constable 2: This is an attempt to present a police atrocity that Budhan Sabar underwent.

Scene II

The actors assume the form of a paan shop. Budhan walks across the street with his wife Shyamali. The shop owner calls him.

Shopkeeper (to Budhan): O Budhan! Do buy a paan. Budhan (looks at the shopkeeper and asks his wife): Shyamali, would you like a paan?

Shyamali gives her assent, shyly trying to hide her face behind the pallu of her sari. Budhan walks across to the paan shop.

Budhan: Give me two Banarasi paans.

Shopkeeper: I will fix them in a moment. (A few moments later, after applying *kattha* to the paan) O Budhanwa, where are you going?

Budhan: Oh! It's a long way. You know my matriarchal uncle? He is not well. We are going to meet him.

Shopkeeper: Do remember me to him. Here, take your paan.

Budhan: And here is your money.

Just as Budhan is paying the shopkeeper, a police officer takes hold of his hand. He has been moving around in the market looking for a Sabar whom he can hold responsible for all of his pending theft cases.





Inspector Ashok Roy (*Catching hold of Budhan's collar*): Aye you, what's your name?

Budhan (*Frightened*): Budhan Sabar, Sahib!

Inspector Ashok Roy: I see, a Sabar! Come to the police station with me.

Budhan: But Sir, what is my crime?

Inspector Ashok Roy: You bloody rascal! Your greatest crime is that you dared to question the law.

The officer pulls Budhan by the shoulder and throws him down on the pavement.

Budhan: Sir! What are you doing? I...I was...

Inspector Ashok Roy: Come to the police station without any arguments or I shall parade you naked through the market. (*Kicks Budhan*) Come with me!

Budhan: Please don't beat me, Sir.

Hearing Budhan's pleas, Shyamali rushes to his rescue.

Shyamali: Budhan ... What happened, Budhan? Budhan ... Sir, why are you beating him ... Sir? What has my Budhan done, Sir?

Inspector Ashok Roy: You ... who are you?

Shyamali: Sir ... me? I ... I am Shyamali. His wife.

Inspector Ashok Roy: Oh, his wife! Bitch, the wife of a thief. Go away. (*He pushes Shyamali who falls on the ground. To the constable:*) Drag





him through the market to the police station.

Shyamali: (*Shouts*) Budhan!

All Actors stand motionless for a few moments.

Scene III

Shyamali: Shyamali is a simple, innocent woman.

Budhan: Budhan was not even told of his crime before he was arrested.

Shyamali: It is the code of law that the accused be told his crime before being arrested.

Constable 1: Budhan's crime lay in the fact that he belonged to the Sabar community, which is believed to be a community of thieves.

Inspector Ashok Roy: But Officer Roy? He always used to keep the law on the edge of his rifle. Killing Sabars was just an enjoyable game for Officer Roy.

Constable 2: Great! What a large-hearted man he is!

The actors assume the form of a police station.

Scene IV

Inspector Ashok Roy (*To the constable*): Take him away.

Constable 2 (*Standing outside the police station*): Salaam, Sir.





Inspector Ashok Roy: Salaam.

The constable locks Budhan in a lock-up. Officer Roy places his revolver on the table, and, after giving some instructions, goes towards the lock-up where Budhan is kept.

Inspector Ashok Roy (*To Budhan*): Tell me ... where have you hidden the stolen goods?

Budhan (*Frightened*): Sir ... I have not stolen anything.

Inspector Ashok Roy: You son of a bitch—I am very much aware that you have not committed any theft. But in the past ten days, seventeen thefts have taken place in this area. How many? Did you hear? Seventeen. I have to prepare the reports of these thefts. Don't you understand?

Budhan: But Sir, I make baskets and sell them to the co-operative...

Inspector Ashok Roy (*Interrupting*): I don't care what you do. You have to confess to this crime. After all, why else has the law given us this? (*Showing him the baton*) Come, plead guilty.

Officer Roy hits Budhan. Budhan cries out in pain. Officer Roy begins to beat him brutally. Meanwhile, Shyamali arrives at the police station, looking for Budhan.

Shyamali (*Trying to enter the police station*): Budhan ... Budhan...

Constable 2 (*Stops Shyamali*): Aye, woman, where are you going?

Shyamali (*pleadingly*): Sir, Sir, I want to meet my husband, Sir.

Constable 2: Your husband? Who is he?

Shyamali: He ... whom the officer brought in a short while ago.





Constable 2: Oh ... him! He's a bloody Sabar. A thief.

Shyamali: No, Sir. Please do not say so ... he is not a thief ... Sir. He has not committed any theft. He makes baskets and sells them to the co-operative. He did not commit any theft.

Constable 2: Whether he has or he has not committed a theft will be decided by the police. Understand?

Shyamali: But Sir, he is my all, my husband. Let me meet him.

Constable 2: If you wish to meet your husband then do so in the court, not here. Get out of here.

The Constable pushes Shyamali, who screams for Budhan.

Shyamali: Budhan ... Budhan!

Her screams are heard by Officer Roy, who is beating Budhan.

Inspector Ashok Roy: Who is it? Who is shouting?

He comes out. Shyamali falls at his feet.

Shyamali: Sir, Sir, let my husband go. Sir, he has not done anything wrong.

Inspector Ashok Roy (*Looking at Shyamali*): You? You have come here, too?

Shyamali (*Pleadingly*): Sir, I beg you to leave my husband. Please, Sir.

Inspector Ashok Roy (*Kicks Shyamali*): Leave the police station or you, too, shall be in for it.





Shyamali (*Angrily*): Kill me. Kill me, too. But please let Budhan go. (*Spreads her pallu in front of Officer Roy*) I beg you for the life of my husband.

Inspector Ashok Roy: This is a police station, not a temple where alms are given. Get lost.

Officer Roy goes to the imaginary room inside. Shyamali continues to plead.

Shyamali: Sir ... Sir. Leave him, Sir. (*A constable prevents her from going inside*) Budhan, Budhan! (*Shyamali, Constable 1 and Constable 3 address the audience together.*)

Chorus: The police are thirsty for the blood of the Sabars. Who will make them understand that we, too, are Indians?

Scene V

The Barabazaar Police Station.

Constable 2: Date: 11th February 1998.

Officer Roy arrives at the police station in the morning.

Constable 2 (*Standing at the gate*): Good morning, Sir.

Inspector Ashok Roy: Good morning.

Inside the station.

Constable 1: Good morning, Sir.

Inspector Ashok Roy: Good morning. (*To the Constable*) Has he confessed?





Constable 1: No, sir.

Inspector Ashok Roy: Hmm. (*Ponders for a while, then says to the Constable:*) Follow me.

Constable 3: Sir ... should I record yesterday as the date of Budhan Sabar's arrest?

Inspector Ashok Roy: When will you understand? Do you want to become an inspector or not? Our job is to turn facts into fiction and fiction into facts, yesterday into today and today into yesterday. After all, for what other purpose are these official papers and records? Put today's date as the day of Budhan Sabar's arrest. And take special care that the serial number is not the regular one. Is that clear?

The Constable nods obediently. Officer Roy and Constable 1 go to the lock-up where Budhan is gasping like a fish out of water.

Inspector Ashok Roy (*To Constable 1*): Wake him up.

The Constable kicks Budhan. Budhan is in agony on being awakened. He asks for water.

Budhan: Water ... water. Someone ... please give me water. (*His throat is parched; he finds it difficult to speak.*) My ... my throat is dry. Please give me some water.

A faint smile appears on Ashok Roy's face as he sees Budhan's anguish.

Inspector Ashok Roy: You feel thirsty? You want to drink water? (*To the constable*) Shivalal, bring a bottle of liquor and pour it down his bloody throat.

Budhan (*Scared by the mention of liquor*): Sir, Sir, I don't drink. Please have mercy on me.





Inspector Ashok Roy: Great! You are a Sabar and you don't drink!

Shivlal brings a bottle of alcohol and gives it to Ashok Roy.

Inspector Ashok Roy: Open your mouth. (*To the Constable*) Block his nose.

Budhan: No ... Sir ... no.

Ashok Roy pours the liquid down Budhan's throat. Not used to drinking alcohol, Budhan begins to cough violently.

Inspector Ashok Roy: Now, not only you but your father will have to accept that you committed the theft.

Once again they beat the half-conscious Budhan with their fists, legs and stick, Budhan cries out in pain. His painstricken cries are heard by Shyamali, who is sitting outside the station, hungry and thirsty. She is terrified. Once again she runs towards the station but the constable stops her.

Constable 2 (*Looking at her sternly*): Aye, woman...you are still here?

Shyamali (*Angrily*): I shall not go without meeting my Budhan.

Constable 2: You will go or else ... (*Threatens her with his staff*)

Shyamali (*Defies him*): Kill me. Kill me along with Budhan. Anyway, what shall I do without him?

Constable 2: If you wish to die, then drown yourself in the village well. But get out of here.

He pushes Shyamali. Shyamali stops the passersby and entreats them to save her husband. On the other side of the stage, Ashok Roy and Constable 1 beat Budhan brutally.





Shyamali: Someone help my husband! These people will kill him. Please help me! Budhan is innocent. He has done no wrong. *(Stops an imaginary man on the street)* Please help me! Those people will kill Budhan. *(Budhan's heart-rending scream is heard from inside the police station)* See... see how mercilessly they're torturing my Budhan! Brother, please help me. We were simply eating paan! Is it a crime to eat paan? Budhan ... Budhan!

Scene VI

The Actors take the form of a police station.

Constable 2: For three days, from 10th February to 12th February, Budhan was kept in prison without food and water.

Constable 3: Budhan was charged with larceny without a remand order. What kind of a law is this?

Shyamali: On 13th February, Sridhar Sabar, another Sabar youth, is brought to the Barabazaar Police Station.

Scene VII

The Barabazaar Police Station. A Constable shoves Sridhar Sabar into the prison cell. In the opposite cell Ashok Roy walks around Budhan, who is lying in a semi-conscious and delirious state, repeatedly begging for his life.

Constable 2 *(Pulling Sridhar by the collar):* Go inside. A bloody Sabar who steals. *(Locks Sridhar in the cell.)*

Sridhar: Sir ... Please let me go, Sir ...

Constable 2: Shut up. *(Locks the door of the lock-up.)*





Budhan (*In a broken voice*): Sir, please leave me. I will die, Sir.

Inspector Ashok Roy: These Sabars are very hard to crack. It seems he will not give in so easily. We will have to use third degree on him. (*To the guard*) Make arrangements for giving him electric shocks.

Constable 1: But Sir ... he might die.

Inspector Ashok Roy (*Looking stern*): You do as you are told. It's an order.

The guard begins to carry out Officer Roy's instructions. He makes Budhan sit on his knees and ties his hands behind him. He ties the electric belt on to Budhan's head and turns on the machine. Budhan begins to tremble. His eyes roll. Saliva drips from his mouth. He is given three electric shocks. Sridhar looks on from the other cell. His eyes fill with tears. He wants to help Budhan, but he is powerless.

Scene VIII

Constable 2: The court has ordered that Budhan be taken into remand from 13th February to 16th February.

Sridhar: The legal system, which is both blind and deaf, did not take into account that Budhan had already been taken into remand.

Constable 1: The deputy commissioner and the superintendent of police searched Budhan's home, but they failed to find anything but poverty.

Inspector Ashok Roy: On 13th February, the court released Sridhar Sabar on bail and he was taken to the Purulia jail.

Budhan: After three days of remand the court decided to punish





Budhan and he, too, was taken to the Purulia jail.

Constable 3: Budhan is shifted to the Purulia jail after sunset, which is against the procedures.

Scene IX

The Actors assume the form of Purulia jail. The assistant superintendent takes attendance. Sridhar is also present among the prisoners.

Assistant Superintendent: Sridhar.

Sridhar: Yes, Sir.

The Superintendent marks his presence.

Assistant Superintendent: Hmm ... Kanji.

Prisoner: Yes, Sir.

The Superintendent marks his presence in the register. Meanwhile a guard slowly and gently brings Budhan to the place where the roll call is taking place. He has been brutally beaten and is unable to walk.

Guard (*To the Superintendent*): Sir, he is a Sabar. He was brought here yesterday evening from the Barabazaar police station.

On hearing the name Sabar, the Superintendent's face is imbued with hatred.

Assistant Superintendent: Hmm ... search him. (*The guard searches Budhan but finds nothing.*)

Guard: There is nothing, Sir.





Assistant Superintendent: Okay. Make him sit there and continue with your work.

Guard: But Sir, it seems he has been severely beaten and injured. He is unable even to walk steadily, and has not been medically examined yet.

Assistant Superintendent (*Showing indifference*): Yes. Okay. Help him to sit, and then you may go.

The guard helps Budhan into a sitting position and walks away.

Assistant Superintendent (*To Budhan*): Aye, son. What is your name? (*There is no answer. Budhan is unable to speak. The superintendent is furious at not receiving a reply. He raises his voice.*) I said, what is your name? (*There is still no response from Budhan. The superintendent is now fuming with anger. He goes near Budhan and shakes him.*) You bastard! Can't you listen? I am asking you something. What is your name?

Budhan stirs as if disturbed from sleep. He is in a state of trauma, unable to understand what is happening to him. Frightened, he replies with great difficulty.

Budhan: B ... u ... dhan ... Budhan Sabar ...

Assistant Superintendent: Hmm ... Budhan ... Budhan Sabar... (*Marks Budhan's presence in the attendance register*) What is your wife's name? (*There is again no response from Budhan. The superintendent raises his voice*) What is your wife's name?

Budhan (*Scared*): Shyamali.

Assistant Superintendent: Any children?

Budhan: Budhan.





Assistant Superintendent (*Notes something in the register*): Hmm. Okay. Sridhar, you be the sentry for Gate Number 1 after serving lunch.

Sridhar: Yes, sir. (*He goes away.*)

Assistant Superintendent: Kanji, you clean the toilets.

Prisoner 1: Yes, Sir.

He, too, goes away. Sridhar and Kanji get busy with their work at the rear of the stage.

Assistant Superintendent (*To Budhan*): And you ... Budhan Sabar... You will sweep the entire prison. Understood?

After giving orders, the Superintendent walks off on his daily round of inspection. Budhan is badly injured. He gets up with great difficulty and takes the broom in his hand, but because of the severe pain in his body, he is unable to move. He sits on one side of the stage. On seeing him sitting, the guard shouts at him.

Guard: Aye ... what are you doing? Why aren't you working?

The Superintendent arrives.

Assistant Superintendent: What's happening?

Guard: Sir ... he is not working.

Assistant Superintendent: These bloody Sabars... they are scoundrels. They will never do an honest day's work; they live by thieving alone. (*Catches hold of Budhan and pushes his face on the floor.*) Thrash him so that he gives up being a parasite. (*The guard and the superintendent beat Budhan mercilessly. His bones are broken. He can no*





longer even moan, but the guard and superintendent continue to beat him like an animal.)

(After they finish with Budhan) Lock the rascal in a dark cell where not even a single ray of light can enter. Let him yearn for light. Only then will this Sabar realize the value of hard work.

The guard calls the other prisoners working at the rear of the stage, and together they dump the half-conscious Budhan in a dark cell.

Scene X

Budhan lies unconscious for some time. Sridhar enters the cell to give some milk to Budhan. The cell is pitch-dark, so Sridhar has difficulty finding Budhan. He calls out his name.

Sridhar: B... udhan... Budh... an. It's so dark here—I can't even see. *(Places his hands over his eyes)* Budhan ... oh Budhan ... please make some sound. Where are you?

Sridhar slowly makes his way forward in the dark. Budhan is lying semiconscious in a corner of the cell. Sridhar's feet come into contact with Budhan. Suddenly, Budhan wakes up from a kind of deep and painful sleep, and screams as if someone has inflicted fresh injury on his wounds.

Budhan *(As Sridhar touches him)* : Don't hit me. Please don't hurt me. I have not done anything. Sir, I am innocent. Please don't beat me. I have not committed any theft... Oh! I have not committed any theft ... ah! *(Budhan writhes in pain as if someone is beating him mercilessly. Sridhar tries to soothe him.)*

Sridhar: Budhan ... Budhan ... Budhan ... I am Sridhar, your friend. *(Holding Budhan)* You don't recognize me. Look at me. I am Sridhar.





On hearing Sridhar's name, Budhan quietens down. He slowly tries to gain control of himself. He narrows his eyes and looks at Sridhar, then takes Sridhar's face in his hands. Once he's sure it is Sridhar besides him, Budhan begins to cry uncontrollably.

Budhan: Sridhar ... Sridhar, please save me, Sridhar. These people beat me mercilessly. Sridhar, I have not done anything. I am innocent... I have not stolen anything ... You ... you know me. I simply make baskets. Sridhar, I beg you, please save me ... or ... or these people will kill me ... Sridhar.

On seeing Budhan break down, Sridhar is deeply moved.

Sridhar (*Trying to console Budhan*): Budhan ... please do not feel scared... Everything will be okay.

Budhan (*Sobbing*): Sridhar ... I am innocent ... Believe me ... I am innocent.

Sridhar: I know, my friend. You have not done anything wrong. But we belong to the Sabar community. We poor tribals can do nothing to these butchers. But ... don't lose heart, my friend (*holding Budhan's face in his hands*). Nothing will happen to you. I'm here with you, my friend. Nothing will happen to you. (*Picking up the glass*) Drink this milk. (*Budhan refuses to drink the milk.*) Please drink it, Budhan. You have not eaten anything in the last few days. (*Brings the glass to Budhan's lips. Budhan drinks the milk. As soon as Sridhar moves to leave, Budhan clutches his legs.*)

Budhan: Please don't leave me ... don't go away, Sridhar. I'm very frightened here. These people will kill me, Sridhar ... please don't leave me.

Reluctantly, Sridhar frees himself from Budhan's grip and picks up the glass.





Sridhar: Please don't worry, Budhan. No harm will come to you. Nothing will happen.

Sridhar goes away. After he leaves, the loneliness of the cell once again gets to Budhan. He is extremely frightened. He begins to feel that, along with his body, his mind and spirit have been deeply wounded. His mind is crowded with terrifying thoughts. He has lost hold over his body and mind. He feels as if his children are calling out to him in the dark cell.

A voice in the background: Father ... father ... bring me a bird from the market.

A voice in the background: And Father, bring sweets for me.

On hearing these voices, which are really inside his mind, Budhan grows very restless. He feels a void all around him. His mind is unsteady. In the backdrop, there is a rhythmic call of 'Budhan ... Budhan', which is very frightening. Budhan feels that someone is calling out for him in that dark cell. He looks around hysterically. He is disturbed and feels a tremendous physical pain. Four actors, chanting, 'Budhan ... Budhan' come and surround him.

Suddenly, Budhan writhes in pain, feeling that he is being tormented once again, Budhan wants to escape from those who want to seize his body and spirit, but the four actors terrify him by moving around him like evil spirits. They frighten Budhan by chanting like ghosts, and continue to chant with a terrifying intensity.

Chorus:

Budhan is a thief.

Accept your crime.

Beat the scoundrel.

Give him electric shocks.

Drive him mad.





The dark cell.

Their pitch rises and they move around Budhan in a circle.

Chorus:

Budhan is a thief.

Accept your crime.

Beat the scoundrel.

Give him electric shocks.

Drive him mad.

The dark cell.

Their pitch rises and they move around Budhan in a circle, more rapidly now.

Chorus:

Budhan is a thief.

Accept your crime.

Beat the scoundrel.

Give him electric shocks.

Drive him mad.

The dark cell.

Their pitch rises and they move around Budhan in a frenzied circular movement. Suddenly, they all become silent. Budhan is unable to bear this attack on his spirit, and thinks he is losing control of his mind. He feels as if the god of death has taken the form of these four people, who are slowly trying to tear out his heart and seize his soul.

Chorus (*Reaching out for Budhan's heart with their hands*): Death ...





death ... death.

Their voice gradually loses its intensity. Budhan can no longer bear the physical torture and the mental agony. After a heart-rending shriek, he falls down dead, suddenly free from everything. Everything is quiet—silent. There is total silence. The actors leave the stage.

Scene XI

Budhan is dead. His body is lying in the police station. The superintendent comes with his colleagues for a medical checkup.

Assistant Superintendent (*Entering the dark cell*): Today this Sabar will have to be medically checked. (*On seeing Budhan lying on the floor*) Wake up the bloody man.

One of the prison officers kicks Budhan. There is no reaction. The superintendent tries to make him sit up, but Budhan does not respond. The superintendent tries to feel his breath and check his pulse. He realizes the body is lifeless and becomes terrified.

Assistant Superintendent: Oh ... my God. He is dead.

All become pale.

Constable 2: Sir. If anyone comes to know about this, we'll be in deep trouble.

Assistant Superintendent: Yes. You're right. But... (*Thinks for some time*) From which police station was he brought here?

Constable 3: Sir, from the Barabazaar police station.

Assistant Superintendent: Hmm...





After pondering for a while, the Superintendent moves to the phone lying in a corner and dials a number. On the other side, Officer Roy is sleeping in the Barabazaar Police Station. He answers the call.

Inspector Ashok Roy: Hello ... Barabazaar Police Station. May I help you?

Assistant Superintendent: Hello, This is the assistant superintendent of the Purulia jail speaking.

Inspector Ashok Roy: Hmm ... yes, Sir.

Assistant Superintendent: May I speak to Inspector Roy?

Inspector Ashok Roy: Speaking.

Assistant Superintendent: Inspector Roy, yesterday, your police station sent an accused to us. Budhan Sabar.

Inspector Ashok Roy: Yes. So?

Assistant Superintendent: For your kind information, he is no more.

On hearing this, Officer Roy suddenly grows alert. He is now somewhat worried.

Inspector Ashok Roy: What are you saying, Sir?

Assistant Superintendent: Yes. He probably died due to excessive torture. The torture may have been inflicted in your lock-up or perhaps in our cell. We are both in the same situation, like two sides of a coin. We now have to think how we can wriggle out of this.

Inspector Ashok Roy (*Without any worry and totally at ease*): What





do you suggest I do? What do we always do under such circumstances?... Suicide ...

Assistant Superintendent: Suicide ... *(Both laugh excitedly. The Superintendent puts down the receiver and goes near Budhan's corpse and orders the watchman.)* You ... go to the market quickly and buy a piece of cloth.

Constable 3 brings the cloth. The others hold Budhan's body upright while the Superintendent ties the cloth around Budhan's neck, thereby making it look as if Budhan has strangled himself to death.

Assistant Superintendent: Now nobody can say that his death ... bring down his body and hand it over to his relatives.

Budhan's body is taken away.

Scene XII

Budhan's body is lying on the floor. Shyamali comes running. On seeing Budhan lying dead, she loses her senses and faints. She cannot believe her husband is dead.

Shyamali: Budhan... Budhan! What happened, Budhan? Why do you not speak, Budhan? See... open your eyes... I am Shyamali... your Shyamali. Look at me, Budhan... Speak to me, Budhan. Why are you so quiet, Budhan? Why don't you talk to me? Get up, Budhan... you cannot leave me like this... *(On seeing Budhan's still body and understanding the finality, Shyamali gives a heart-rending shriek and begins to cry disconsolately)* Budhan ... Budhan, you cannot go away, leaving me alone. Oh ... someone wake my Budhan! Oh ... wake him up! Budhan... Budhan ... Take me with you! I ... Didn't I tell you these people will kill you? Killed you—they've killed you ... they have killed my Budhan...





Shyamali wails loudly and beats her chest with her hands. She clutches Budhan's body and wails. Officer Roy and the Assistant Superintendent arrive.

Assistant Superintendent: Aye, woman ... your husband strangled himself with a piece of cloth.

Inspector Ashok Roy: Cremate this body immediately before us. And stop this wailing. Prepare for his cremation immediately. Understood?

Officer Roy and the Assistant Superintendent leave the house. On seeing them walk away, Shyamali begins to shout like a wounded tigress.

Shyamali: Cloth! Budhan had no spare piece of cloth with him. Then... oh... you will go to hell. May your wives become widows and your children be orphaned! (*Calling after them*) You rascals, come back! You have taken my husband away. (*She breaks down. She goes back to Budhan's body.*) Budhan... these same people have killed you. I will kill them... Budhan.

Shyamali is crying. Ashish, who is a member of the Kheria Sabar Kalyan Samiti, arrives with a message from Mahasveta Devi.

Ashish: Shyamali, Mahasveta Devi says that Budhan's body should not be cremated at any cost. Bury Budhan's body so that nobody comes to know about this. To fool the police, burn Budhan's effigy. Have you understood what I have said? And please do not worry. All of us, the Samiti and the villagers along with Mahasveta Devi, will avenge Budhan's death.

This man goes away. Shyamali gets up slowly to the rhythmic chant of 'Budhan... Budhan' in the background. She digs a hole in the floor of her own house and, with a heavy heart, buries Budhan. She then lies down on the ground. On the other side of the stage, there is a public demonstration for justice





in the face of Budhan's custodial death.

A group of demonstrators take centre stage.

Scene XIII

Villager 1: Budhan did not commit suicide. He was killed.

Constable 1: Conduct a post-mortem.

Villager 2: The police have killed Budhan.

Villager 3: Budhan was innocent.

Sridhar: We want justice . . . we want justice!

The demonstrators march in a circle and cry for justice.

All: We want justice.

Villager 1: Let Budhan's death be investigated. We want...

All: Justice!

Villager 2: Stop the injustice on Sabars. We want...

All: Justice... We want justice, we want justice!

Villager 1: The people's voice has been heard...

Constable 1: Justice has finally awakened...

Villager 2: At last the day has arrived...





Villager 3: The day of justice...

The actors assume the form of a court room.

Sridhar: Date: 21st July 1998. The Calcutta High Court.

Scene XIV

Judge: Order ... order! The Court has heard the appeal of Smt Mahasveta Devi, Advocate Pradip Roy and Justice D.K. Basu in the Budhan murder case. The postmortem reports and the Central Forensic Science Laboratory's report prove that Budhan Sabar did not commit suicide. He was killed. The court orders all police officers involved in this crime suspended. The court directs the government to pay Rs 1 lakh to the widow of Budhan Sabar as compensation, and hands over the detailed investigation of Budhan Sabar's death to the C.B.I.

After the final judgement, all actors stand still while Budhan's spirit takes the front stage. Budhan addresses the audience.

Budhan: Finally ... finally ... tell me, what was my crime? Why was I killed? I was only eating a paan. Is even eating a paan a crime for us... ? My wife is now a widow... My son is orphaned... What will happen to them now that I'm gone? Was ... did my crime lie in the fact that I was a Sabar? A DNT?!

As if along with Budhan, the entire community of DNTs is crying. The actors form a semicircle.

Scene XV

Shyamali: The same question—every DNT asks this question: Why





are they subjected to such atrocities?

Villager 1: If a DNT commits a crime, is death the punishment?

Constable 1: No Bhansali was born among the DNTs.

Villager 2: No Harshad Mehta was born among the DNTs.

Villager 3: No DNT is involved in a fodder scam.

Sridhar: No DNT is involved in the Bofors scandal.

Shyamali: Are we second-class citizens?

All: Are we second-class citizens?

Are we second-class citizens?

Are we second-class citizens?

Are we second-class citizens?

Are we second-class citizens?

Are we second-class citizens?

All: We need respect.

We need respect.

We need respect.

We need respect.

They form a human chain, all Actors holding their hands high.



APPENDIX
A VISION OF TRIBAL INDIA

Makar Savar by Mahasveta Devi

Makar Savar befriended Mangal Sing Sardar, a Bhumji boy, when he was only sixteen. The Savar boys always befriended Bhumji boys, and they remained lifelong friends when each promised to address the other as 'Phul'. Makar was a strapping youth with wide shoulders, a slim waist, laughing eyes and brown hair. He could bring down a flying wild duck with an arrow and dance through the night during Shikar Parab, the hunting festival. Only in anger did his eyes blaze, and then he became violent. Well, he belonged to the Kheria Savar tribe—known as Savar in Purulia—whom the British had once classified as one of the 'criminal tribes' of India. Makar, in anger, would send arrows flying and beat his enemies mercilessly with *daag*. The police officer had recorded his name in the formidable police register so that Makar, too, could be apprehended whenever any violent incident took place. Makar Savar, or Babu Savar, of village Sabuijor, is prone to violence.

Such records always helped the police of Purulia. Any time the Savar could be arrested, criminal cases under different sections of the Police Act could be framed against them and they could be handed prison sentences. The non-tribal babus of village Purulia were afraid of the Savars. If a Savar went onto the police record as a person 'prone to violence', why not arrest him and send him to jail?

Makar's father said, 'Son, now that your name is on the record, you are a true Savar.'

'Why? Wouldn't I still be a Savar if my name wasn't put on the register?'

Babu sighed and said, 'The police won't let us survive. They feel bad till they put some Savars behind bars. That is why Kisto Babu





says, 'Babu! I will see that the Savars get justice, raise their heads and live like human beings, not hunted animals.'

But Makar, at sixteen, did not know that his was to be a cursed and condemned existence. So he befriended Mangal with great joy. The Savars crave love, and Savar youth just love this befriending ceremony. The Savars and Bhumji youths assembled and they sang and danced, beating *madols*. Makar sang, 'Once, twice, thrice, I'll sing *jhumur* songs. The madol-beating boy will become my phul!'

The day of the phul ceremony was long past, yet Makar could recall the day when he had sat at his door all alone, the evening wind chilly and heavy with dew and the air thick with the heady scent of ripening paddy. Ah, he would surely have gone for a few drinks if he had the money. But he hadn't gone out to work, so he had nothing in the small polythene pack that served as his purse.

Mangal came on his bicycle and stopped.

'Phul! Makar Phul!' he said. 'What are you doing?'

'Just sitting here.'

'Didn't go to work?'

'No, I didn't.'

'No use grieving like this.'

'I'm not grieving.'

'Eat anything?'

'No, I didn't.'

'Shall I buy some *muri*?'

'No, Phul, you go home.'

'This way not once, but thrice ...'

Makar smiled a little. 'Yes, three marriages!'

'You won't go in for another marriage?'

'No, I won't.'

'Well, I'll come tomorrow. My son has a fever ... I'm taking some medicine for him.'





‘Go home, Phul.’

‘But if you don’t work...’

‘Does a Savar die if he doesn’t eat for one day? Go home.’ He caressed his axe and said lovingly, ‘My axe could also do with a day’s rest. It’s off day for him.’

Mangal shook his head in sympathy and left. Makar continued to sit. Yes, Mangal was a good, loyal friend. He had arranged all of Makar’s marriages.

Back when Gokul Babu and his henchmen had come to evict the Savars from Sabuijor, Makar had said, ‘We’ll not leave just because Gokul Babu wants us to—no, not any more. Those days are over. Not a single Savar family will leave. Now we live on forest-department land. And Gokul wants us to leave?’

They attacked the henchmen with axes. Some were seriously wounded. The police came, and the Savars were arrested. Kisto Singh Deo, the local school teacher and an old friend of the Savars, arranged for lawyers, and thanks to his efforts the Savars were released after one year.

Kisto Babu had said, ‘Try to calm down and get married, you hotheaded Makar! I tell you, I’ll see that the forest *babus* give you work as labourers. Husband and wife work, earn wages, life becomes good. The *babus* want to keep you people engaged in criminal activities, and you too jump at the slightest provocation, and the people of Purulia just love to say, “Savars? All criminals.” And know this: no one can evict you from forest land as there is no plantation, just barren land.’

At that time Mangal had arranged a marriage between Makar and Revati. Kisto Babu had laughed and said, ‘Revati? Pahari Savar’s daughter? I know her. She will be a good match for our Makar.’

Yes, the first marriage was performed with all the rituals. On the auspicious day, Makar was first married to a mango tree and Revati to a morwa tree. ‘Let your married life last as long as the trees do. As the tree yields fruits and flowers, you too beget children, as children bring joy and a sense of fulfilment to life.’ After the tree ceremony





came the proper marriage, then rice and mutton, plenty of liquor, and songs and dances. Revati was as lovely as a flowering morwa tree.

Makar was happy, truly happy. Both of them left for the forest in the morning. They dug pits and planted saplings. The saplings are tall now. But Revati was not a mother even after five years. She proclaimed: 'What is a marriage without children? I won't stay with you. One should not keep a tree that doesn't yield fruit, nor a woman who proves to be barren. You marry again.'

'Let her come, but you stay, too.'

'No, I can't bear the thought. I won't be able to overcome my jealousy if you two have children.'

Revati cried a lot when she left. Well, Makar sees Revati whenever he goes to the Kandor village. Revati is Bhuta Savar's wife now, a proud mother of three sons. She is always nice to Makar, telling him, 'Do rest a little. Have some muri and onions.' Then she asks, 'What! This tree is also barren?'

'Yes, but it's nice to look at.'

The second marriage was also arranged by Mangal. He had cried to Kisto Babu, 'Should I find another for Makar?'

'Please do. I can't bear to look at his face.'

Mangal said to Makar, 'I have talked to Genda Savar. His daughter Bhuti will be a good match for you.'

'Will Genda agree?'

'And why should he not?'

'Well, this wife left me ...'

'So what? Are you to become a sanyasi, a holy man?'

'See what you can do, Phul! A hut without a woman is so lonely!'

'She left because she didn't have a child for five years! Couldn't she wait a little longer? Why, didn't my elder brother have his first child after years of marriage?'

Makar felt reassured. What was a Savar's definition of life, after all? The Savari would cling to the Savar like the slender *kujuri* creeper,





and then, like a bountiful morwa tree, yield fruits from her womb—children. Only that Savar home was happy where children played, laughed and cried. Ah, the sweetest smell was the smell of a little baby's soft skin.

There was little song and dance this time. Makar paid the bride price. Kisto Babu gave rice and a goat for the community feast, and the Sabuijor Savars provided the liquor.

Bhuti's father was the gardener at the school where Kisto Babu taught Bengali. Bhuti had stayed in a big village and had seen the households of the non-tribals. She said, 'We must raise another hut. I'll keep goats and chickens there. In the lean season we can make ropes from wild grass. If we work hard and put the money to good use, even a Savar hut will look different.'

Makar was happy and content for three years. He grew to respect Bhuti, who collected sal leaves while Makar thatched the hut. She saved money from her wages and purchased two goats, and she swept and cleaned the hut and the yard. Kisto Babu said, 'How nice! I wish the other Savar women were like you.'

'They can't be. Their menfolk drink too much.'

'And Makar doesn't?'

'Only moderately.'

Makar went to Akanda Savar's mother with Bhuti. That old woman knew how to make herbal medicine, magic potions and charms to conquer evil forces. She wove a bangle of wild creepers and tied it to Bhuti's wrist. She said, 'I'll give up my practice if you do not have seven sons and seven daughters.'

But Bhuti remained childless.

Makar was despondent. Akanda Savar came and told him: 'A good offer from Obin Babu. We're to reap his brother Gobin Babu's paddy field and carry the harvest to Obin Babu's granary. Twenty rupees per head.'

'I won't steal. Kisto Babu has asked me not to.'

'Do you think the babus will spare you? If we don't steal Gobin





Babu's paddy, why, Obin Babu will frame us and we'll get arrested. If we do, Gobin Babu will pounce on us. Born Savars, how can we fight the joint forces of the babus and the police? It's best to do what Obin Babu wants. Take the money and go into hiding.'

'No, Akan, no. I won't.'

Makar sighed and said, 'Your mother has given Bhuti some medicine. I can't relax till she has a child. I am happy, Akan! We go to the forest, collect firewood and sell it in the market. We water the nursery plants. I am content.'

'We also want to, but do they stop hounding us? And the constable says, if the Savars become law-abiding, what are we to do?'

Still Makar did not take sides in the family feud of Obin Babu and Gobin Babu over the harvest. Akan, Bota and Mahadev bargained, raised the rate and went to work, but the brothers jointly raised a noise that the Savars of Sabuijor are lawbreakers. They are nothing but thieves, the brothers said. It was time the authorities realized this and the panchayat evicted them. So all the Savar males of Sabuijor were arrested, including Makar. This time they were imprisoned for three months.

A weeping Makar told Kisto Babu, 'Never have I ignored the deities, Babu. When I go into the forest, I ask for the Befo god's protection. I have no land, yet I worship the Pahar god for rains during the drought. Offer him rice, rewers and fowl. Why aren't they kind to Makar? I feel I will choke in the prison cell. I can't breathe, I feel so unclean! Do look after Bhuti, Babu! The Savar has no one but you.'

And misfortune struck Makar, robbing him of everything he cherished most. Bhuti refused to wait for him; she broke the bangle on her wrist, tied her clothes in a bundle and left. She told Akan's mother, 'My heart breaks to leave him, but he is cursed—he won't ever have a child. Please tell him.' She left weeping. Makar did seem to be cursed.

'My younger sister's daughter is teething,' she said. 'I can't go on leading the existence of a barren tree.'





‘What about your goats and chickens?’

‘I’ll leave every thing with Kisto Babu. I can’t be unfair to him.’

‘You have a soft spot for Makar.’

‘That’s why I didn’t leave earlier.’

Babu said, ‘What is it I hear, Genda? Bhuti has left Makar or what?’

‘She wants children, Babu!’

Mangal told Makar as soon as he was released. Makar came home, fell to the floor and cried and cried. He told Mangal, ‘It hurts, Phul! It hurts.’

‘But why did she leave?’

Makar shook his head and said, ‘The tree longs to bear fruit. Why should a woman remain barren and cursed? O gods! What sin did I commit? Why, why do you punish me thus?’

The other Savars came and consoled him.

‘Makar! Makar! One shouldn’t depend on the floods. Floods come and go. An overflowing river like Chaka never deceives. You need a typical Savar girl who will stay.’

‘No, no more marriage.’

Mangal said, ‘So this time I’ll bring him a river.’

‘Not now, Phul!’

Makar became lonely, a recluse. The Savars pitied him. ‘Look at Makar, Babu Savar’s son. Poor Makar! Kawa Savar is a beast. He beats his wife mercilessly. Yet his wife stays with him, bears him children. Makar never beat his wives, never shouted at them, and see how he is being punished.’

Makar brooded for several months. Then he told Mangal, ‘Phul! I can’t take this loneliness anymore. Yet I’m afraid to marry. What do I do?’

‘Give it another try, Makar! It might work the third time.’

This time Makar was married to Kumari, Ratan Savar’s daughter, from faraway Manbazar.





The girl's name was a wonder. The Savars said, 'What a true friend this Mangal is—he promised to bring a river, and here is a river called Kumari Makar! It's very auspicious. We are sure she'll never leave you.'

'Bless me, friends. I need all your blessings.'

But Kumari was neither Revati nor Bhuti. Within a few months she sized up Makar, all right—a softie! She liked savage, brutal men. Soft-spoken, too! A man weak in character.

She asked him one day, 'Why did the other two leave?'

'Ask them.'

'I can well guess the answer. Why should they stay if they can't have children?'

'Know what the palmist says?'

'What does he say?'

'My third wife will bless me with children.'

'Well, that's good.'

Kumari went to the forest, collected firewood and went to the Nayagarh weekly market to sell it, all by herself. She talked to the Savar men—chatted, laughed, flirted with them. Makar waited for her with utter resignation. This angered Kumari.

'What are you? A man, or a clay doll? I talk to other males and you just laugh?'

'What do I have to do? Beat you?'

'A man would.'

'How does it feel in bed? Am I a man, or a clay doll?'

Kumari sighed and said, 'A man. It's all right. Now go to work.'

'I didn't beat the other two, so how can I beat you?'

Makar sold the goats and the chickens and purchased a sari and glass bangles for Kumari. He tried to please her all the time. This perplexed Kumari.

'Why do you give me so many gifts?'

'Because I want something.'

'What?'





‘Give me a child, Kumari, a son or a daughter.’

‘You think I don’t want one?’

‘Only one child!’

‘Is it in my hands?’

‘Then who is responsible?’

‘You must be the guilty one!’

‘A man can’t be barren. Perhaps you are a freak, Kumari!’

‘How does Revati leave you and give birth to sons? And Bhuti? Isn’t she going about with a daughter clinging to her waist?’

Makar dragged Kumari by her hair, threw her on the ground and kicked her.

‘You are a whore! You must have chosen a lover! Otherwise you wouldn’t dare talk to me thus.’

Kumari picked up a fallen branch, beat Makar and screamed abuses at him.

People came running. Makar and Kumari abused each other.

Then Mangal said, ‘Well, both of you have abused each other. Makar thinks it’s Kumari’s fault she’s not a mother, and Kumari thinks Makar is not man enough to sire children. Let’s go to one who knows.’

Akan’s mother said, ‘Go to Manbazar. Thelu Mudi is a powerful witch doctor. He’ll tell you the truth.’

Makar said, ‘Yes, let’s go.’

Kumari said, ‘Why not?’

Mangal was not a Savar. He had studied up to class ten. He worked as a postal peon, wrote letters for others and shared a fee, took patients to hospitals and charged a fee. He was respected for his wisdom, vast learning, and judgement.

He said, ‘It’s better if they go to the big hospital. The doctors know best.’

Makar said, ‘Is there a lady doctor there?’

‘Yes, Phul! There is!’

But Kumari was adamant: ‘Let him go first. If it’s found that he





has no defect, I'll know that I am barren, and I'll leave. You people always condemn us, the women! But how come two women who were barren here, at Sabuijor, became mothers when they married elsewhere? Be fair!

Silence fell upon the crowd. Makar stared into their eyes. What were they trying to say? Why did they look perplexed? Did they, too, think he was incapable of sowing a potent seed in his wife's womb? He felt caught in an invisible mesh. He said, 'I'll go. I'll go with Kisto Babu. He has a nephew there, a doctor.'

Kisto Babu said, 'Yes, I'll take you on my motorbike. Serious, very serious! What is a house where there are no children? Don't worry, Makar! See, Bhajan Mahapatro is sixty and his daughter is fifteen. Born after fifteen years! It's in God's hands, Makar!'

'Yes, Babu, but the gods are so merciless to me!'

'It'll be all right.'

Makar had been to prison in Purulia, but not to the hospital. The big, sprawling hospital, with a bustling crowd outdoors, made him nervous. But the reassuring manner of the doctor gave him courage. Yes, he had seen this man at Kisto Babu's house.

The doctor took him to a secluded room. He said, 'Strange! He's childless? Why should it be so? But it's very, very praiseworthy that the husband has come to be examined. Amongst us, the babus, the men always send the women.'

Half an hour later, the doctor called Kisto Babu.

'Whom have you brought, uncle?'

'Why such a question?'

'He underwent a vasectomy quite early in his life. How can he have children?'

'Vasectomy? Makar? But how? It was true—in 1975 or 1976 there had been a mass vasectomy programme at Nayagarh health camp. Makhan, a tout, had gone to villages to lure the tribal youths. As soon as I had come to know of it, I had led a big demonstration, shouting, "This is an evil plan to check the growth of the tribal population. The Savars are already a minority tribe." They had





wound up the camp and fled. We had had Makhan thrashed thoroughly.'

'Hey! Makar! Did you have an operation at that time? When you came out of jail for the first time?'

'Did I have what, Babu? Operation? I don't understand.'

'That health camp... Nayagarh... Did you go there with Makhan? You fool! Did you take money from Makhan? And go to a doctor?'

Makar's face lit up with a glow and he smiled. In an eager voice he said, 'Yes, Babu! I remember it. Would I forget such a day? Oh, what food Makhan Babu gave me at his house... mutton and rice and potatoes ... before my first marriage ... I didn't suffer any pain, Babu... and I got a hundred-rupee note!'

Kisto Babu continued to stare at him. Makar's innocence shattered him.

'The doctor just pricked a needle ... said it might itch a little for a day or two... Makhan Babu said, "You have to take this injection, Makar! You'll get money for this."'

'You wretch! How many of you?'

'All the boys fled. I couldn't.'

'Remember? I went with a crowd and drove them away.'

'Before that...'

'And how come I was not told?'

'Makhan Babu asked me not to tell you ... he was close to the police ... I was afraid of him...'

'Makar! My child! That injection and operation made you sterile... barren ... like a castrated he-goat ... when you were just twenty... that's why you can't become a father, Makar! It's such a stab in the back!'

'Can't the doctor babu cure me?'

The doctor said, 'No, Makar ... this is no illness. This is done to menfolk so they don't become fathers. Didn't they explain what they were doing?'

'Nothing, nothing did they say, Babu. I had just been out of jail... and Makhan Babu said that the *gormen*, the Sarkar, wanted to inject





everyone who came out. If one didn't comply with their wishes, why, the gormen would send us right back to jail... and I can't stand enclosures ... and I was going to marry Revati ... home ... what's done cannot be undone ... I would have killed Makhan, but he died last year.'

Kisto Babu said in a soft voice, 'Come, Makar, let's go...'

The doctor said, 'Oh, it happened during the Emergency?'

'What else? Come, Makar! I wish I could do something for you, but what?'

'Yes, Babu, let's go.'

Makar did not go home. He sat at the liquor shop and went on drinking. Akan and the other Savars looked at each other and shook their heads.

Akan said, 'Come, Makar, let me take you home.'

'Not now, Akan.'

He reached Sabuijor after midnight. He sat on the ground, leaning against the tamarind tree that Revati had planted. When morning broke, he went and called Kumari. She opened her mouth but Makar said, 'No, don't talk, Kumari. A doctor made me sterile even before my first marriage, but I didn't know that. They told me that if I refused, the gormen would send me back to jail. They said, "Only an injection ..." I didn't know what they were doing... never told me... just gave me some money ... leave me, Kumari, go to your father. Take your clothes, glass bangles, you'll get married again... become a mother... go!'

Two days had now passed since Kumari had left. Mangal, too, had left a few hours ago. Makar sat in the darkness and pondered his life. Savar life was controlled by outside forces—powerful village babus, police, the panchayat. Yet most Savars had a wife, children, a home. Makar had nothing.

The next day, too, he sat on the doorstep, mute and stunned. What to do? Should he leave Sabuijor? But his world was confined to Sabuijor, the police station and the prison.





Where could he go? What could he do? What did he know of the great big world?

In the afternoon he picked up his axe and left Sabuijor. There was no time to go to the forest. Walking aimlessly, he stopped before the big stump of a baola tree, dead long ago. It belonged to no one, and no one bothered to chop it down. Well, he would, and he would take the pieces to Srimanto, the tea-shop owner at Nayagarh market. He would surely give him four or five rupees, enough for a kilo of coarse rice. He lifted his axe and brought it down. With his dry, brown hair and loincloth, he looked like the legendary Ajan Savar. Ajan Savar had gone to chop the stump of an old baola and had found a pot of gold. He had left the gold undisturbed and collected the firewood.

The babus of Bandih stopped him. A Savar from Sabuijor, and alone, too! What luck! Gokul Babu and others had tried to evict the Savars but had failed. They dared not touch the hair of a Savar when he moved in a group. They beat Makar up and dragged him to the police station. Gokul Babu was not a supporter of the government in power, but he was convinced that the second officer would thank him for beating and delivering a Savar.

The second officer was a newcomer to the area. A week ago he had received a most alarming circular from some invisible authority in Calcutta—the police officers were asked to see that Savars and other persons belonging to various tribes were not molested and harassed. If they were, the offenders must be dealt with severely.

He was deeply annoyed to see five babus dragging a Savar. He had planned to go to the local 'VIDIO PELES' to see Anil Kapur in *Ram Lakhan*. He did not want his evening ruined.

What had happened? What had the Savar done?

Gokul Babu panted with righteous indignation and said, 'These Savars just won't let the forest survive. Do arrest him... else we'll deal with him ... he has been chopping down a tree... firewood worth ten rupees at least... fine him ten rupees and seize his axe.'

Makar wiped the blood from his split lips and said, 'That stump of the old baola tree, Babu... ?'





‘Oh, that stump?’

‘Yes, Babu ... I haven’t eaten for three days so I thought I would chop it. Srimonto would surely pay me four or five rupees if I could finish chopping it down. There’s no forest near Bandih, Babu!’

‘Your name?’

‘Makar Savar, Babu!’

‘Wipe off the blood, and go out and wait.’

Makar left the room. The second officer thundered at Gokul Babu. The circular gave him a golden opportunity to shout at these caricatures of Bhadraloks.

‘You know what’s written in this circular? You don’t, and since you don’t know English you wouldn’t understand it. The police will simply not allow you people to beat the Savars and drag them to the police station.’

‘This Makar is danger Savar, Babu!’

‘*Dangerous*, not danger. And I will decide who is dangerous, not you! He was hacking at the stump, and is that ruining the forest? And do I not know that your nephew fells trees and sells timber, and that’s how he has built his two-storey house?’

‘Sir, see...’

‘Yes, stay in the lock-up for one night, see how it feels. Give him back the axe.’

‘You can’t do this to us!’

‘So you are threatening me! See whether I can or cannot! Hey! Take them to the lock-up and lock it. There are more than ten complaints against each of you.’

He took the constable aside and said in a low voice, ‘Release them after 10 p.m.’

Gokul Babu lamented, ‘There’s no justice for the poor!’

‘Go tell that to the new superintendent of police.’

Again the officer whispered to the constable, ‘Don’t forget to release them just after 10. Dhillon’s truck arrives at 12 sharp.’

Dhillon’s trucks carry stolen timber to Jamshedpur in the night,





and the different police stations receive an envelope. The second officer did not want a witness in the police lock-up when such transactions took place.

He came out and told Makar, 'Hey! Here, take your axe and go. Come to me whenever you're in trouble, and don't forget to tell Kisto Babu that I've been good to you.'

Makar took the axe, put it on the floor and folded his hands. 'Babu!' he said.

'What now?'

'My home is an empty one, Babu. There's no one there. I'd be happy to spend the night here, as it is chilly. No food at home either, Babu! But the babus! They have wives, children, cooked food, nice homes. Why make them suffer, Babu? Do set them free, Babu!'

'Didn't they beat you? Drag you here?'

'A Savar is used to abuses, Babu, to beatings and hunger! But *they* are not. They have homes, Babu. I do not have a home.'

The second officer stared at Makar with disbelieving eyes. Makar Savar walked towards Bandih. He would manage to chop the stump in the darkness. The stars were so bright.



Glossary

Aatu: uncle, husband of father's sister

Agaria: ironsmith

Age of Kali: According to Hindu belief, there are four ages, Krita, Treta, Dwapara and Kali. Kali or Kaliyug, the fourth age of the world, is the last of the four stages through which the world passes. It is supposed to be the age of sin or vice, lasting for one thousand years

Akka: elder sister

Ami: a thin dal prepared of lentil

Anna: a former Indian copper coin, worth one-sixteenth of a rupee

Apsara: celestial nymphs who dwell in heaven

Arati: the ceremony of moving before an idol or person, in circular motion, a lighted lamp as worship or welcome

Ashadh-Shravan: the fourth and fifth months of the lunar Hindu calendar, corresponding with July-August

Auliya: sadhu or holy man

Baa: mother

Babu: officer

Bai: a term used to address an elderly woman

Baithak: sitting room, also refers to informal music session held in the close proximity of the performer

Banjara: a nomadic community

Baraat: wedding procession

Bhadrakali: a popular form of Devi worshipped in Kerala

Bhadraloks: a Bengali term used to denote the new class of 'gentlefolk' who arose during British colonialism; generally referring to a well-





- mannered person
- Bhajeas*: a deep fried snack prepared with vegetables coated in gram flour paste
- Bhakhar*: meals
- Bhakri*: a round flat unleavened bread used in cuisine of western and central India
- Bhanamati*: black magic
- Bhasumanga*: a tree
- Bhau*: elder brother
- Bidi*: a thin, flavoured Indian cigarette made of tobacco wrapped in tender leaf
- Bundi*: a fried Indian snack prepared from chickpea flour
- Chaddars*: sheet of cloth
- Chambuni*: a herb believed to induce sleep
- Chamundis*: deities
- Chanda*: donations
- Chappals*: footwear
- Chimta*: a pair of tongs
- Chivda*: fried puffed rice
- Daag*: thick sticks
- Dada*: grandfather, elder brother
- Daji*: brother-in-law
- Darshana*: vision or glimpse of the deity or a saintly person
- Dassara*: a festival celebrated on the tenth day of Navratri, tenth day of the Hindu lunar month of Ashvin (September-October)
- Deepavali*: meaning 'row of lamps', a festival celebrated in October or November
- Dholak*: drum
- Dhoti*: a loincloth worn by men
- Dwapara*: the third phase of the world lasting 2000 years
- Fakir*: a religious ascetic who lives on alms





Gauri: Goddess Parvati, Lord Shiva's wife; also refers to a woman with a white or yellowish complexion

Ghazal: a poetic form derived from sixth century Arabic verse, consisting of rhyming couplets and a refrain, with each line sharing the same meter; the themes of ghazals usually revolve around love and separation

Ghungroos: many small metallic bells strung together to form anklets worn on the feet by dancers

Gormen: white man

Gotras: clans

Gudi Padwa: new year celebrated by people of Maharashtra

Guru: a spiritual or secular teacher

Gurudwara: place of worship for the Sikhs or followers of Sikhism

Haldi: turmeric

Handia: a kind of drink

Hansali: an ornament worn around the neck

Haveli: derived from the Persian word *hawli*, meaning 'an enclosed space', *haveli* refers to private mansions, usually having a historical significance

Holi: a spring festival

Jalsa: a folk theatre form, also merrymaking

Jamang: the first field of the year, smaller than the main field

Jawans: soldiers

Jiji: elder sister

Jivla: a game in which seven flat tiles are stacked; one group throws a ball or stone to topple the tiles and the other group tries to rebuild the pile without being hit by the ball

Jowar: sorghum, a millet

Kaikadi: a nomadic community

Kaka: uncle, father's brother

Karma: an act, good or bad, according to which one is judged and punished or rewarded by God





Karthika: the eighth lunar month (October-November)

Kasturi: musk

Kattha: catechu

Khad matkon: mahul tree

Khichdi: dish prepared by mixing pulses and rice boiled together with spices

Krita: the first phase of the world, lasting 4000 years

Kumkum: saffron or turmeric powder put on female deities; also applied by married women on their foreheads as a symbol of their marital status

Kurta: a loose collarless shirt worn by people in India

Kurvali: a festival

La Panew: a tall plant

La pathuh: a kind of plant

Ladeya bale: banyan tree

Ladi geet: a form of folk poetry

Langdi: a game in which one person has to chase others while hopping on one foot. The rest of the players run and dodge him in a predefined square area

Lepej reel: kendu tree

Lingam: symbolizes phallus, an emblem of the Hindu deity Shiva

Lingayata: a member of a Saiva sect of southern India, marked by wearing of the lingam and characterized by denial of caste distinctions

Lota: a small brass urn used for keeping water

Mahar: a community

Makar Sankranti: the sun's passage from Cancer to Capricorn

Mama: mother's brother

Man/munn: a measure of capacity, about 12 kgs

Mandavali: decorative strings that are tied across the forehead and hang on either side of the bride's and groom's faces.





Maratha: a member of the princely and military castes of the former Hindu kingdom of Maharashtra in central India

Master-kaka: teacher-uncle

Matka: a kind of illegal lottery

Matti: a tree

Maushi: mother's sister

Milo: cheap grain

Mirdha: chieftain

Misal: meaning a 'mixture', is a delicacy eaten in Maharashtra

Moksha: in Hinduism, moksha usually means liberation of the soul from the cycle of birth and death

Morwa: a tree

Muri: puffed rice

Murmum enga: a female animal resembling a large deer

Nallah: a rivulet or ravine

Namaskar: Indian greeting or salutation

Nana: maternal grandfather

Paan: folded betel leaf filled with betel nut and spices

Pai: the utterance *pai* is accompanied by the spitting of water, signifying purification of the farm

Pallu: loose end of the sari

Panchas: members of the panchayat

Panchayat: a village council

Pandal: a large open-sided, temporary pavilion used to hold ceremonies or gatherings

Panwallah: seller of paans

Parathas: Indian flat bread prepared by frying whole wheat dough on a flat pan

Parises: gotras or clans

Patils: head or chief





Patravali: a plate or dish prepared from leaves

Pedhes: a kind of sweetmeat

Phool Sankranti: The festival of flowers known as Phooldei is celebrated on Sankranti day. The festival begins on the first day of Chait, when village girls pray, sing and offer flowers on their neighbours' doorsteps

Phul: flower

Pitambar: In Sanskrit, pita means yellow and ambara means garment; pitambar refers to yellow clothes traditionally worn during rituals or religious occasions

Poha: pounded rice

Pujari: priest

Pukra: a concoction supposed to make a girl fall in love with a boy if she accepts it from him

Puranpoli: rotis stuffed with cooked and sweetened paste of gram

Ragi: a variety of millet

Ramnavami: a festival celebrating the birthday of Lord Rama

Rangoli: colourful ornamental lines and figures drawn on the floor with various powders

Ranu: a substance used in fermentation

Sadhu: a holy man, a sage, ascetic

Sal: a tree that is an important source of hardwood timber

Salaam: a salutation

Samadhi: a state of intense concentration achieved through meditation, at which union with the divine is reached

Sambar: a large deer having three-tined antlers and a reddish-brown coat

Samdhin: co-mother-in-law

Sari sarjom: sal tree

Satyanaarayan: a ritual performed on special occasions or in gratitude

Sherbet: a cool beverage made from fruits, flowers or herbs

Shikar: hunting





Shivarathri: a night sacred to Shiva on which fasting, vigilance and other observances are held; the fourteenth day of the eleventh lunar month (January-February)

Sireng Ruram: rooster used for ceremonial purposes

Siroka: a sacrificial ceremony performed to purify the farmland and seek blessings

Sringars: make-up or decoration

Swayamvara: an old practise existing among kings wherein a girl of marriageable age would choose a husband from among the suitors present

Taher Era: sacred grove

Takalong: a rare variety of cucumber, yellow in colour

Talange: patils

Tamasha: a traditional Marathi folk art form, accompanied by songs and dance, performed by local or travelling theatre groups

Tanda: a Banjara camp

Thali: plate or dish

Threta: the second of the four stages which the world passes through, lasts for 3000 years

Tilak: a mark made on the forehead to indicate membership to a sect, caste or status

Titar: partridge

Uchalya: branded

Upara: outsider

Vaca: word, voice

Vaisakha: second month in the traditional Hindu lunar calendar (April-May)

Vanavasa: wilderness, exile in the forest

Vibhuti: sacred ash of burnt cow-dung with which Shiva is said to have smeared his body; used by devotees

Wada: settlement

